A Lesson in Thorns

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Graphic Depictions Of Violence, No Archive Warnings Apply

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Ur mom <3, best of da best ;), I'm not Allowed to Make Comments

on Ongoing Port Mafia Record's Legal Disputes.. BUT, BSD4568260, Best of skk, Best Soukoku AUs, fics that hit different, Private

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A Lesson in Thorns

by arkastadt

Summary

After Hirotsu gives them their offerings, they exchange rings, and Dazai never, not once, breaks eye contact even as they're instructed to kiss. Chuuya expects a wet tongue in his mouth as some sort of demonstration of dominance, so he's surprised when Dazai's hand lifts to cover them both, and the only thing that's pressed to his lips — the corner of them, to be precise — is a dry, fleeting kiss.

And then it's done.

Chuuya is officially, irrevocably married to the one and only head of the mafia.

Or, an AU in which king of the sheep Chuuya has to marry port mafia boss Dazai to get one of his people out of jail.

Notes

Just know that this... this is my ultimate big baby... please treat it gently.

I know some.... of the tags.... might be confusing so if you have anyyyy questions please feel free to ask in the comments or shoot me a dm on twitter (@arkastadt)! I'll give specific warnings in the A/N before each chapter if there are any.

Check out the playlist here!

Find the pinterest board here!

Check out the stunning art by
- run_mello here and here
- oxxtoblur here, here and here
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and the cosplay by @gin.wtt on instagram ! <3

Translation into Russian available on Ficbook
Translation into Spanish available on Wattpad

I hope you'll enjoy this :3

See the end of the work for more notes

- Translation into Italiano available: A Lesson in Thorns by zickcantkill

Chapter 1: Symbols

PART I: SEEDS

On the morning of Dazai's first day as the new leader of the port mafia, the sky is bleeding crimson-red.

Fitting, Dazai supposes, considering how much blood has been spilled over the last week in which the European organization Mimic invaded Yokohama and set the underworld ablaze to find absolution in its righteous flames.

Lives were lost. Buildings destroyed. Books uncovered. An old boss perished. A new one arose.

Dazai lets out a sigh as he steps away from the sight of the city skyline and turns to regard the office instead. Fine antique furniture. Black ceiling. Black floors. A carpet that matches the wine-red color of the scarf. Dark, rich, and mystical — just like Mori was. All things considered, it fits Dazai like a glove; he's fully aware of that. Still, he will have to change things around here.

The shrill ring of the phone shatters the silence in the room, and Dazai feels his bones grow already tired of all the tedious interactions that come with this position.

"Yes?"

"B-Boss, Akutagawa Gin is here to see you."

Dazai smiles quietly. "Let them in."

As the seconds tick by, he makes himself comfortable behind the desk, adjusting the height of his chair before effortlessly slipping into his new role once he hears the doors open.

Gin is followed by several guards trailing after them. Another rule: no meetings with strangers unless someone else is present. Tedious. Irritating. Efficient.

"I hope you're bearing presents," Dazai drawls, placing his chin on his intertwined fingers.

Gin offers him a timid nod before placing a thick, overfilling folder on the desk. "I dug as far as I could. The last eleven years were child's

play, but everything before that...” They press their lips together. “Hard. But not impossible.”

Not even a few days ago, Gin was a forgotten child in the slum, raised by a handful of kids and their brother who, in the end, chose mindless violence for a drop of revenge over them. Dazai gave them a choice: die in that dumpster they called a house or come work for him.

Dazai could have gone for one of Mori’s trusted subordinates for this task, especially with *this,* but he has an inkling that, unlike the scarf, trust does not get handed down from one leader to another. It gets earned. So as easy as it would be to simply take over everything Mori built here, Dazai will have to create his own castle if he wants to remain sitting on the throne, and that means creating his own inner circle as he locates and eradicates the pests. Gin is the first step of a thousand-kilometer track.

And Gin grew up in Suribachi City. That’s why he gave them this specific task as their first assignment.

“Let’s see.” Dazai grabs the folder and opens it to a candid photograph on the first page. It must have been taken in the last twenty-four hours. Looking at it, Dazai murmurs, “there you are.”

His ascension to the highest floor of the building might have happened less than a day ago, but Dazai’s been busy since then. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that he learned more in that time than he did over the last eighteen years of his pitiful existence.

And one of his first tasks to his subordinates was to find one specific person.

“— various conflicts with them. It would have been very easy to take them out if not for the gravity manipulation skill. He’s strong. Their current base is an abandoned railroad yard northeast from here.”

Dazai nods then flicks his fingers towards Gin. “You can go now. Thank you.”

They bow their head and let the guards guide them out of the office, leaving Dazai shrouded in rays of blazing red rays of daylight as he traces his fingers over the photograph of a young man, his obnoxiously bright ginger hair ridiculously long and pulled up in a ponytail, wearing a tattered oversized leather-coat with a bunch of knives strapped to him. His face is twisted into a permanent glare. He looks like a vigilante character out of a superhero show. Somehow he

still makes it work.

The king of the sheep.

The gravity manipulator.

A5158.

Nakahara Chuuya.

“Found you.”

***

16 months later

"You can still change your mind, you know. We can still run."

Chuuya stares back at Yuan's reflection in the vanity mirror, her pink braids the brightest thing in the room. "And get hunted by the mafia for the rest of our lives? Fuck, no."

Her fingers momentarily tighten on the thick, slick strands of his hair that she's combing back into a bun.

"We've dealt with them before,” Yuan says. “We can do it again."

That was different.

Chuuya raises his chin. "C’mon finish this. And be fucking careful. The walls might have ears."

Running might have still been an option yesterday when they weren't in a building full of mafia members — in a building with the mafia boss *himself*. Perhaps they still had a chance to slip out of the city then. Although, if he’s being entirely honest, escaping without any casualties was all but impossible the moment Chuuya agreed to this marriage.

The minute he uttered the words *yes*, his fate was sealed. Bound to the mafia. The only way out of that now is death. And he still has quite the list of things to do before that.

Yuan's face is narrowed into a miserable glare, and although he gets it, he does; he hopes she'll pull herself together once the ceremony starts. Chuuya heard the mafia boss has a habit of nitpicking, among many other character traits.

When Yuan is done with the subtle but defining make upon his face, she turns his chin to look at himself in the mirror. Chuuya's hand trembles when he lifts it to his cheekbone.

So far, he's managed to stay calm given his circumstances, but —

The sheep are about to be handed off to *the fucking port mafia* — an organization they've been at cold war with for *years*, and Chuuya, their leader, is about to marry *the boss* of that organization.

The demon prodigy.

Yokohama's living nightmare.

An inhuman monster.

God knows what else people on the streets like to call him. So the last thing Chuuya's people need right now is for their leader to lose his cool — even if he is, in fact, *this* close to doing just that.

There is simply no time to fall apart at the moment.

Yet as the clock on the wall ticks silently, Chuuya feels his nerves light with firebolts, coursing through his blood like recurring heart attacks.

He's turning twenty in a few days and he is about to be *married*.

All he ever wanted was to give the sheep something to live for. A place to call home. A place where they could feel safe.

Not this.

Never this.

"Chuuya..." he hears Yuan murmur, her voice thick with unshed tears and apologies that she doesn't owe him. Because what it ultimately comes down to is this: the marriage was a deal offered to the sheep, to Chuuya specifically in exchange for saving Shirase from prison. Hardly a deal when it's like offering a piece of food to a starving man, but it was the only way to save him, and Chuuya's not going to start regretting the choice now.

Shirase is family. Crucial to their little band of misfits. Chuuya would marry the devil himself if it meant he could, at least, try to save him — though, ironically, that is exactly what's happening here.

And there *is* a faint, feeble light at the end of the tunnel.

The sheep will become insiders, earning a spot right inside the beating heart of the devil's nest. It's as good of an opportunity as it gets to ruin this fucking organization once and for all.

The clock on the wall beats in time with Chuuya's pulse. He lets out a strained breath. "It's time."

Yuan's grip around his arm as he gets up from the chair is so tight it will probably leave a few bruises, but she grants him his wish and stays silent. Instead, she gives him a once-over, tucks a few loose strands out of his face, and brushes a finger over the place where the kohl eyeliner is.

For as long as he can remember, Chuuya never cared about his physical appearance, simply because there was never any time for that. Sure, he made sure to find a place to wash his body once in a while, brush his teeth, and comb through the messy, overgrown hair falling from his head, but that has always been about maintaining some sort of hygiene even while living on the streets. Never about looking attractive. Being dolled up, especially for someone else, feels ridiculous, but those were one of the few conditions he was given when he agreed to go through this. The port mafia's advocate, Lippmann, called it *helpful advice*, but Chuuya's not stupid. It's an *order*.

Because the man he's about to fucking marry — a low shudder crawls through him — likes his things *pretty* and *clean*.

As Chuuya and Yuan navigate through the dimly lit hallways of the building, he finally allows himself to picture the person that's he going to face soon.

Over the years, Chuuya has heard many, many things about the port mafia boss.

That he's a sadist.

That he once crushed an entire enemy organization from the west in one single day with only one man by his side.

That he likes to torture his prisoners for weeks, sometimes months on end.

Once, an old drunk from the docks claimed that he saw the boss drink someone's blood, though Chuuya thinks that rumor has more to do with a little too much *gin* and less with the *truth*. Vampires don't

fucking exist.

And what's even less believable is that the boss simply took a stroll at the port, when everyone knows for a fact that he never steps outside his impenetrable tower, especially not without a myriad of bodyguards and men. Always surrounded by walls, just like the bandages he's

supposed to be wearing.

Another rumor that went around is that the boss already has ten wives and husbands, which is why Chuuya was more shocked about the mafia proposing a marriage with *him* than about the part with the marriage. Apparently, the organization never grew past the fifties. Though, Chuuya supposes there is reason to it.

It is an act safer than a truce — something that can be broken at any given moment, especially when every person that somehow ended up in the mafia's vices was never heard of again.

Marry them. Kill them. Easy.

Chuuya doesn't plan to make it that easy for them. Not if he has any say in it.

He will survive this old fucker — and judging by all the stories going around, rumors about his sheer power and brain, it has to be some old, wrinkly man like one of those politicians he always sees in the news. Even if it's the last thing Chuuya will do.

It's the final thought on his mind before they reach the rusty stealth doors that separate the sheep from the mafia.

Next to him, Yuan squeezes his hand in a bruising grip. "Ready?"

"As much as I'll ever be," Chuuya murmurs with a trembling nod. "Let's do this."

An agonizing second passes, both of them everything *but* ready, but in the end, Yuan pushes the doors open, revealing a room bathed in dark and blood-red hues. There are two rows of seats. Chuuya recognizes his people on one side. Not many mafia members present on the other.

It's an intimate affair.

But his stomach lurches when he looks at the platform and finds it

empty.

He was supposed to see the boss there, or at least, someone who will tell him what to do except stand here and gape and —

Chuuya's skin heats with humiliation.

This is the mafia making a fool out of him, and it's not going to stop with this either.

Chuuya grinds his teeth together, though, and forces his feet to move anyway. If they want him to do the first step, then fine, he'll do that. He ignores the heavy stares following him as he strides down the short aisle and onto the platform, keeping his chin and gaze high the whole time. Only then and there does he dare to look at the mafia members sitting in the rows.

There are six of them. Three men in the front row. Two behind them. And one in the back, his one leg thrown over the other as he wears the most aggravatingly amused expression Chuuya has ever seen.

Yeah, laugh all you want for now.

Chuuya swallows. The man in the front row is *old*, like *ancient* with greying hair and — is *that* the boss? Surely, he'd do something other than stare straight ahead as if waiting for instructions, right? That can't be it.

No one else looks worthy of the grand title either.

Is this perhaps a trick, after all? Have they gathered the sheep here to slaughter them instead? Will —

"Oh, well," says a voice from the far back, annoyingly chipper for a situation this grave, "this is awkward. If no one's going to say anything, then I'll make the introductions." It's the guy sitting by himself, though he gets up as he speaks, dusting off his black suit before offering the room a dry smile. "For a wedding, the mood is astronomically low."

Chuuya barely restrains himself from snapping at this stupid self-declared clown. "Where is your boss?" he grits out once the man — though he hardly looks older than him — reaches the podium.

"Right in front of you."

The words ring through the small, almost empty room like a gunshot.

Chuuya stares, processing, fighting the instinct to call bullshit because the man is already starting to lose jacket and shirt, revealing a plethora of white.

Bandages.

The boss is rumored to wear bandages.

Chuuya assumed because he was *old* and trying to protect himself. Or covering up his tattoos in public. Or something.

But he never even thought to believe the fucking boss of the port mafia was a mere *guy*.

A kid.

Just like Chuuya.

"Hey, Chuuya," the boss casually says while one of his people, now next to him, offers him a black kimono to slip into. "I've been waiting for you."

His brain barely manages to deal with all these shocking revelations, but once he forces air back in and out of his lungs, Chuuya finds his voice again, even though it's laced with hostility. "*I* wasn't the one who was late."

He doesn't register the people around them reaching for their weapons until the boss lazily lifts his hand. Not a word is said, but the gesture is clear enough. *Stand down.*

Chuuya blows out another strained breath.

"Hirotsu-san, will you do us the honors?" And in a more quiet tone, Chuuya's fucking soon-to-be-husband murmurs, "You're a feisty one. I can already see."

The older man steps between the two of them and starts talking.

It's not a long ceremony, perfunctory and simple. The entire time Chuuya stares at the other man, taking in every line and striking feature of his face. Sharp. Daggered. Even with that idle smile of his. Maybe *because* of it. The lighting makes his only visible eye glow red.

Chuuya thinks he is about to marry the devil.

Assuming that he would be an old, unattractive wrinkly man was an honest mistake, but now everything else makes even more sense. What do they always say about demons and devils? They're beautiful.

They come in a shape so desirable just to claw out your heart with their pretty little smiles and their pretty little fingers. And the boss is nothing short of *breathtakingly gorgeous*.

Hirotsu makes them share and exchange cups of sake. The vows are a front to bind the sheep to the mafia. Chuuya, and the sheep, learn his name.

Dazai Osamu.

The port mafia boss and now — Chuuya's husband.

After Hirotsu-san gives them their offerings, they exchange rings, and Dazai never, not once, breaks eye contact even as they're instructed to kiss. Chuuya expects a wet tongue in his mouth as some sort of demonstration of dominance, so he's surprised when Dazai's hand lifts to cover them both, and the only thing that's pressed to his lips — the corner of his mouth, to be precise — is a dry, fleeting kiss.

And then it's done.

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The "celebrations" are hosted several floors above the makeshift shrine. A lot more people are in attendance this time, the mood not as frigid and gloomy as it was during the ceremony.

Soft, melodic music is playing from the speakers, the guests mingling even though Chuuya can feel their judgemental, wary eyes puncturing the back of his skull where he's sitting with Dazai.

Their table is spacious, to say the least, but only hosts a handful of people. Hirotsu, and a young woman with red, tied-up hair and flamingo-pink eyeliner — definitely prettier than Chuuya's which she makes sure to let him know with a scrutinizing glare.

Meanwhile, the sheep have been seated somewhere ten tables away, left alone to the beastly-cold welcome of the mafia. So much about an *alliance*.

"If you're scared about getting poisoned," Chuuya suddenly hears next to him, the first thing the boss is saying to him after his unexpected entrance, "then don't waste your time. I'd advise you to be careful with any food that comes from outside this building, but here..." Dazai pillows his chin on his folded hands. "... I would not have gone through all of the trouble of marrying you only to kill you on your first night."

It's not so much fear as the utter lack of appetite. Not only because of fried nerves but because the amount of delicacies around them is obscene. In Suribachi city, kids like him have to dig through trash to find something to eat, and here...

He knows for a fact that most of it will be thrown away by the end of the night.

Still, Chuuya levels his glare at Dazai. "You trust your people that much?" In an organization like the sheep that has twenty-seven members? It's possible. But in the mafia? Trusting all thousands of his men? It seems foolish.

"This has nothing to do with trust," Dazai tells him, "and everything to do with hierarchy. I gave the order not to touch you. That order is absolute."

"What about the rest of us? Did you tell your people to leave the sheep alone as well?"

Dazai disentangles his long fingers and leans back in his chair, arching one brow. "Surely they can defend themselves, no? As creative as you lot have been in the past."

In the past was completely different.

It was the sheep against *fractions* of the mafia, not the entire goddamn building. The sheep with a *plan.*

Not even ten minutes ago, Chuuya saw some mafia-grunt not-so-accidentally run into Shirase and try to make a scene out of it.

"Just because they can, doesn't mean they have to," Chuuya hisses. "This isn't just you and me. It's about the sheep and the mafia working together, too, so you better stick to your own damn words or —"

"Or what?"

"Or, I'll run your fucking organization into the ground." Chuuya at least thinks of keeping his voice low, but every other sense of self-preservation gets shoved aside by the explosive temper pumping through his veins.

He had a plan. He still has. Play along. Become part of the mafia. Not only symbolically but practically. Gain their trust. Then ruin them from the inside.

That vague plan doesn't mean that Chuuya has to become entirely pliant and obedient — not unless the boss wants him to — because that would be too transparent to see through. So his little outbreak — it's not precisely *stepping over the line* but *walking the tightrope,* and the outcome of it entirely depends on the man sitting across from him.

Dazai cradles his chin in his hands. Then he shrugs. "You can try."

It's... not what Chuuya expected, but for now, it’s good enough.

"I want to be with my people," he announces.

"These are your people now."

"Then I want to be with *the sheep*."

"And I want a brain with a perfect chemical balance," Dazai retorts. "What do you think it will look like when you leave your *husband* all alone during your celebratory dinner?" Chuuya balls his hands into fists under the table and forces out a breath. He might not like it, but Dazai's right. Sort of. "If you want port mafia to continue seeing you as an enemy within the ranks, then go ahead. Go over there. Show everyone how much this marriage means to you."

Ah, shit.

Chuuya hates this guy. He really does.

"It's an arranged marriage," he mutters, even though his plans to leave this table to be with his family have been decimated. "You know it. I know it. Everyone else in this room does too."

"A symbol," Dazai says in a voice that flows like milk and honey, "is a thing that stands for something, representing something abstract, something we associate. Take *sheep* as an example. When people think of them, they think of obedience. Following rules. Brainlessly so. Sheep know their place." Chuuya feels his neck flush as he holds the

bastard's aggravating gaze. "You and your merry bands of misfits took that symbol and spat on it, right? You wanted to show that you were everything but obedient, little animals."

Well...

"Are you going somewhere with this?!"

Dazai acts like he didn't even speak. "You know why symbols matter. Don't start being ignorant now."

Rolling his eyes, Chuuya finally turns away, sliding his fingers around a knife just to have something to fidget with. "No rumor ever mentioned how annoying you are, *husband.*"

"You'll soon come to see that there is a lot that the rumors have gotten wrong."

After the party, Dazai orders one of his subordinates to show Chuuya their accommodations and then promptly disappears into the crowd before Chuuya can even blink, let alone ask any questions.

He barely managed to swallow down a few pieces of duck, but now, as the young woman, Higuchi, leads them through dark, glass-covered hallways, the anxiety in the pit of his stomach grows bigger and bigger with each step.

He's not sure what will await him behind closed doors tonight.

So far, nothing is as Chuuya expected.

Dazai isn't eighty years old — at least, he doesn't look like it. He doesn't shoot people that look at him the wrong way. He was *polite* to their waitress. Right now, the worst thing about him seems to be the fact that he's incredibly irritating — but that kind of behavior can be lethal in its deception. If Chuuya just so much as relaxes for one second, it could cost him.

Maybe the rumored beast inside Dazai is still slumbering, biding its time for the perfect moment to strike.

"This is it," Higuchi says once they step out of the elevator, and in time with her voice, lights all around them flicker to life, revealing space. Lots and lots of space.

It's the entire floor, Chuuya realizes somewhere in the back of his head.

He never even had his own room.

"Here is the card. You swipe it in the elevator before getting on it, so only specific people have access. The boss stocked the fridge before your arrival, but you can call service any time and either order a meal or send someone to buy groceries for you. There's the living room. The bathroom. The bedroom..."

Chuuya's head swims.

This is too much. Way too much.

Then again, he did just marry into the wealthiest organization in the entire goddamn city. What did he expect? A modest two-room apartment?

"So Dazai lives here?"

"*The boss*," Higuchi corrects, "owns the entire building. He chooses to live wherever he wants to."

Chuuya doesn't know what's more ridiculous: that she expects him to call Dazai *the boss* all the time or that she clearly has no idea where Dazai lives but doesn't want to admit it outright. It's late, though, and a headache has been forming in the back of his skull since the ceremony, so he lets it go with a twitch of lips, following her tour without any more comments.

Once the door falls shut after Higuchi leaves, dropping Chuuya into a fortress of eerie silence, he stands there for a moment or two. Looking out of the curtain wall and over Yokohama's skyline glimmering and flashing in the darkness of the night.

This is it, huh?

Chuuya doesn't own a lot of things, so one small bag is all he brought. It only takes a few minutes to unpack the clothes and possessions that he doesn't mind Dazai seeing. The rest he leaves locked up in the bag, hidden under the bed.

Because of that, Chuuya's left with time to spare.

He could sneak out, find his friends and the quarters they were placed in, but tonight of all nights, it would send the wrong message. So he waits. He waits and waits and waits because he refuses Dazai to take advantage of his exhaustion. He'll be prepared when the devil comes

for him.

Apparently, his body doesn't care because while he waits, Chuuya accidentally dozes off and only jerks out of it when the sound of the elevator doors sliding open echoes through the apartment. It takes him a few seconds to orient himself, to remember that he's in the infamous mafia nest and not sleeping on a shabby coat in an abandoned house. He wipes a few strands out of his face, then glances down at himself, tucking his ink-black silk yukata into place — the only thing he's wearing.

Making the first move is the plan to feel less like this is something he *has to do* and more like something he *wants*.

Dazai must take his sweet time because it feels like a few agonizing hours pass before he finally appears in the doorframe, coming to a halt and leaning against it.

Chuuya doesn't look away even as he's being scrutinized, taken in, from top to bottom. He doesn't sweat or falter. He waits.

"Lovely, really," Dazai finally drawls then, flicking two nimble fingers towards him, "but you can put away all this. I only came here to say something."

Angry heat pulses through Chuuya's veins, making his jaw clench involuntarily, as he forces himself to stare back at that condescending prick. "Say *what*?" he growls out.

"I'll be giving you your initiation tattoo in a few days. You know about the procedure, yes?"

Chuuya nods, puzzled.

"Wonderful ~. Then keep your nights free."

And the bastard just turns away.

Chuuya is too surprised to reply, let alone ask *where the fuck are you going?!* But as silence once again falls over the room, emotional exhaustion seeping into him like a drug, he decides that maybe it's for the best. This way Chuuya can keep his dignity — or as much as there's left of it — for another day.

Chapter 2: Day One

Chapter Notes

> Hey guys! Thank you so much for the comments on the first chapter <3 I love getting to hear from you and this fic is really important to me and about to become sooooo much that it really means a lot so thanks! And have fun.
>
> CW for:
> - physical violence towards the end of the chapter

Chuuya genuinely wishes he could say that his night is shit, that he doesn't sleep well in his gigantic bed of fluffy, cloud-like silk sheets and pillows, but the truth, as much as it pains him to admit, is that he slept *heavenly*. Like a babe. So much that the knife he kept under the pillow probably would have wound up useless. Although judging by the unchanged appearance of the room around him, no one was there to use it against anyway.

However, getting through the night is one thing. Getting through his first day and every day that follows after will be quite another caliber of strategic difficulty.

A glance at the clock reveals that it's almost noon.

Less than two weeks ago, sleeping in so late would mean that half of the day's opportunities would be already wasted. No free breakfast at one of the shelters. No easy way to slip through the busy eight o'clock crowd and swipe a few wallets here and there. No quick access to whatever local shower he found that day.

He supposes that routine will change now, but Chuuya doubts being late, especially on his *first day*, is good. Never mind that he has no idea of what his job will even be.

All this knowledge sends him scurrying into the bathroom and then slipping into today's and only choice of clothes he owns. It's a weatherproof, wild-hearted mix of leather pieces, chains, and holsters. Yuan once joked that he looked like a vigilante from one of those superhero shows. Chuuya never watched them, but he knows what the term means — vigilante — and he supposes, in a way, he is. The realistic, tattered, and spat-out version of it, anyway.

Once he's ready to go, he all but sprints towards the door that will lead him to the stairs instead of the elevators. He sprints back again when he remembers the damned key card. Then he is off. For real, this time.

The stares, drilling holes into his skull, start as soon as he arrives in the lobby, though every time Chuuya so much as meets someone's eyes, their gazes dart away as if struck by lightning. If he wasn't currently lost in the crowd of people that look like office workers but aren't, trying to find someone or something telling him what the hell to do, then perhaps he'd laugh. As it is, Chuuya's just one —

There.

Yuan.

Not for the first time in his life, he thanks the gods above for her pink hair and how much easier it is to find her that way. The overflowing burst of colorful relief starts ebbing away as soon as he notices the black suit she's wearing. Yeah, they're in the mafia now. After all of Dazai's talk about symbolism, it makes sense to dress them appropriately. Still, somehow, Chuuya foolishly convinced himself that the sheep would get to keep at least one piece of themselves. He has fought against mafia members that don't abide by that awful dress code. *Why not them?*

"Yuan! Jesus, I'm so glad —"

"Holy shit, you're alive!" Yuan exclaims at the same time, and before he can utter anything else, she's already dragging him into a corner a bit more private and —

The other kids are there. The sheep. His sheep.

Chuuya's chest sags with relief. *They're all in one piece.*

"Are you okay?" Yuan asks immediately, her hands flying to his cheeks and neck, checking for something Chuuya doesn't want to think about right now. "Did he hurt —"

"I'm fine."

"You can tell me, Chuuya. I just want to help —"

"Oi," he places his hands over the hands cupping his face, and meets her worried gaze, "I'm fine. I really am. I spent the whole night alone

in my bed. I swear on everything dear to me."

The instant her concern bleeds away, a furious, tight-lipped scowl replaces it, and she punches his shoulder. "You just disappeared last night! I thought that was — you —"

With a mild wince, Chuuya rubs the spot. "I'm sorry, okay? Dazai kept going on about symbols and shit, so I figured it would be best to give it a few days before I see you guys. You know, instead of giving all these penguin fuckers a reason to doubt us."

"So, it's *Dazai* now, huh?" The person who speaks isn't Yuan, but Luca — along with Chuuya, Yuan, and Shirase, the fourth and last member of the sheep's inner circle.

Chuuya finds himself faltering. It's not like that name *means* anything. (Of course, it means something, Dazai would say if he was here right now. Names are symbols, too… a*nd why the fuck is that asshole in his head already?!*)

"I can't call him the port mafia boss for the rest of our time here," Chuuya eventually replies with a shrug. "It's his fucking name, Luca."

Now that Yuan isn't bothering him anymore, he gets to see the rest of his friends. Their cold, guarded expressions make his stomach sink. They are supposed to look at *the mafia* like this.

Not at *him*.

Chuuya's still theirs, all the way, and he opens the mouth to say that before he remembers where they are.

"We made an alliance," Chuuya snaps. "We all fucking agreed to this."

"No, *you* agreed to this," Luca shoots back.

"We still voted! And what was I supposed to do? Let Shirase rot in jail?"

At the mention of his name, Shirase shakes his head silently. It's been an ongoing fight since the minute he was released. He thinks the sheep should have left him there and ran instead. Chuuya thinks he'd rather swallow bullets than abandoning him in a fucking cell.

"We all voted," Yuan mutters, keeping her voice quiet. "And it is what it is now."

No one says it, but Chuuya hopes they know that it's not simply going to remain this way. They're not going to live and die as mafia slaves.

Chuuya has a plan.

All they have to do is be patient.

Not all, but some tension drains out of the air and leaves Chuuya with enough time to see that everyone is wearing matching suits. Some, like Yuan, even carry a document. Which means they must have already gotten instructions.

"So you all work?"

"My job starts in..." Yuan glances at her watch. "... less than five minutes, actually. Fuck. I'll have to run in these fucking pants!"

Chuuya scans them. They look chic but not very comfortable. "Where'd you even get them?"

"From our *superiors*," Shirase says, though he makes it sound like a question. "Yours must have forgotten. What do you have to do?"

That's what Chuuya would like to know as well. He crosses his arms. "What do *you* have to do?"

"I'm at the docks," he says with as much of an impressed voice as a factory worker waking up every morning.

"I'm shadowing mine," Yuan offers. "If that bald-headed shithead even thinks of using me as a human shield..."

Chuuya snorts softly. Out of everyone, Yuan is the one he's the least worried about.

"So what about you?" Shirase asks again. "Any fancy job positions?"

Chuuya hardly doubts he'll get any special treatment.

"I'll find out in a few minutes. Yesterday was... hectic."

As if on cue, his people start dispersing. Some of them clap his shoulder in a wordless goodbye, but a few, including Luca, leave without saying anything. Chuuya keeps his expression neutral, even if his throat dries up.

Of course, the sheep are already fighting among themselves on the

first fucking day. It's probably what the mafia *planned*.

First, they separate. Then they create problems.

And it's such an obvious trap that it's all too easy to fall into.

Yuan's the only one who hugs him and promises that she'll catch up with him later before taking off.

Now that this is done, Chuuya can go on with whatever the hell *his* job is supposed to be. He figures the only way to find out is to ask Dazai himself.

Chuuya's still not entirely familiar with the building — all the signs and markings... *confusing*, but one fact is universally known.

The boss resides on the very top floor.

Which is all fine and well, but none of the fancy key cards Chuuya was given yesterday grant him access to the top floor when he tries to use them in the elevator. It's affronting because Chuuya is the boss' *husband*.

He should damn well have the right to visit that man if he wishes to. Then again, understandable because this isn't like any other marriage. Husbands or not, in the end, the port mafia is going to view Chuuya and the sheep as their new pawns first and foremost. The power balance is frustrating, but it's also something he concluded would happen from the moment he said *yes*.

The elevator stops on the... fifth floor, Chuuya thinks, and several people step inside. Chuuya doesn't soften his glare even when their eyes immediately flicker away like they accidentally looked at something they shouldn't have. Most of them are suit-wearers with those stupid-looking shades. (Seriously, who wears sunglasses inside a building?)

Chuuya doubts they have access to the office of the boss either. The one that dares to glance at Chuuya for longer than one brief glimpse, though — he's wearing a thick colorless coat with a silver fur collar that hides half of his face, but unfortunately, not the disgrace of bangs falling over his forehead. Now this one... he looks like he might get Chuuya where he wants.

Chuuya's lucky when all the grunts shuffle out of the elevator at the next stop, leaving only the two of them. He waits until the electrical

hum of machinery working starts up again before speaking. "Oi, you."

He's met with a pair of indigo violet eyes staring back at him. For such a dazzling color, they look morbidly empty.

"Do you have access to the top floor?"

"If Dazai-sama wants to see you," the kid replies with a voice so flat it sounds like a corpse is speaking, "he will call for you."

Shoving his hands into the pockets of his jacket, Chuuya leans against the wall behind him." Yeah, right, except that I need to see him *right now*, and since I'm *married* to him..." He tilts his head daringly. "... I think I'm an exception."

However, his reply is the same unimpressed stare. "Dazai-sama would have given you a card then."

Oh, for fuck's sake.

Within a matter of seconds, Chuuya pushes away from the wall and has the kid pressed against it instead, his hand fisting in that fur collar to keep him pinned.

So flaunting his new status will get him nowhere.

Tough luck.

Fortunately, Chuuya has quite a bit more cards than that up his sleeves.

"Get me to the boss's office," Chuuya snaps. "*Now*."

"Or *what*?"

"Or I'll paint this elevator with the color of your fucking intestines."

Chuuya doesn't like to use *tainted* without a hefty reason, having made it a point not to rely on it too much with a government that has progressed far enough to be able to disable even the strongest of abilities, and because nine out of ten times he doesn't even need it. Sometimes, on days like this, where his patience is strung out and this close to snapping like a rubber band, he's willing to make an exception.

Before he does, though, the kid finally grits out a, "*fine*."

Chuuya eases up on the force in his arms but keeps the kid in a hold as he gets out a keycard and holds it to the detector before punching the highest number on the elevator. "Now that wasn't so hard, was it?"

"I'm only doing this because you're known not to give up that easily, and I don't want to be late to my meeting," the kid mutters, "not because that threat actually worked on me."

Known for being a stubborn asshole, huh?

Chuuya supposes, just like there are rumors about the boss and all his underlings in every corner you sniff on the streets, there must be rumors about him. About the sheep. It's inevitable when their organizations have been facing each other in various conflicts for years now.

He wonders what the rumors say.

"So who are you?"

"I'm the white reaper."

"Yeah, and I am the stupid fool who agreed to marry into a mafia organization. What's your *name*?"

"Atsushi."

The rest of the ride is neither long nor filled with any more words.

When the elevator dings, Chuuya lets Atsushi lead them through the labyrinth of crystalline hallways, each harboring several stiff-faced bodyguards that look more like marble statues than living people, before finally stopping in front of a massive double solid door.

"I'm here to see the boss," Atsushi tells the four men stationed in front of it.

One of the men lifts his hand to his earpiece, mutters something that Chuuya barely understands even though he's only several feet away before the man inspects the keycard Atsushi holds up. Then finally, finally, the doors open.

Considering it seems to be the only room on the entire floor, it's safe to say that's it's gigantic. Big enough to fit a small army in here. However, the walls are all painted in dark, grim colors, and despite the spacious situation, Chuuya feels suffocated.

He wonders how the hell someone could spend so much time in a room this oppressive without going insane.

Atsushi leads them past an expensive-looking, long table and around the corner. And there he is.

Dazai.

Sitting behind a desk.

He's out of the festive clothes he wore yesterday, instead wearing a charcoal grey suit. The only colors in his entire ensemble are his blood-red scarf and his amused eyes as he beholds Chuuya and Atsushi.

"Dazai-sama," Atsushi says, "he wanted to see you. I hope we're not disturbing."

"It's fine. I was about to take a break anyway." A dazzling smile surfaces on his face. It makes Chuuya's scowl deepen. "Thank you, Atsushi-kun. You can go now." Dazai turns to Chuuya. "And you can let go of my protégé."

Chuuya does, albeit with an unimpressed glare. They both wait in silence as Atsushi bows his head and walks out of the office, and then —

"Look at you behaving like a half-wild beast and threatening my poor subordinates on your very first day here. Color me surprised."

"I wouldn't have to if you had just given me a fucking card," Chuuya snaps, taking a step closer, "or, you know, had given me any fucking instructions on where I'm supposed to be. All the sheep have jobs. Meanwhile, everyone's too damn scared to even look at me!"

"So much anger in such a tiny body."

"Who's tiny?!"

"You," Dazai says flatly and pillows his chin on his folded hands. "There are only three people with access to this floor, and these people would rather slit their own throat before even looking at me the wrong way. I can't say the same about you, husband."

Chuuya only shoots him another withering glower.

"As for the job. You're married to me. Isn't that work enough?"

"It's *aggravating* if that's what you mean," Chuuya mutters, crossing his arms, "but this is an alliance, so I want to work."

"Let's see what I can offer you." Dazai grabs a sheet of paper from the stack on the desk. "Too delicate. Too important. No. No. Not enough experience. Nope. No. Hm, no."

Chuuya stalks forward and slams both of his hands on the desk. "Oh, come on, you gave all of the sheep a job!"

"And they're all grunt jobs," Dazai replies easily. "You're not a grunt. You're at the very top of the hierarchy now."

Somehow, it feels like the complete opposite. *Top of the hierarchy*, his ass.

"So what the hell am I supposed to do? Sit around on my ass and do nothing?!"

"Formal training, first of all. Once you stop walking around like you stepped out of a superhero comic," Dazai's not-so-subtle gaze travels over Chuuya's outfit, "we take it from there."

Looking down at himself, Chuuya blinks. "There's nothing wrong with my clothes."

"If you deal with street gangsters and angry children with knives, no."

The i*f you want to be the head of the mafia, yes* goes unsaid.

Chuuya wants to mutter another reply about Atsushi not having to wear a boring suit either, but then his eyes fall to the document Dazai was looking at earlier, and he blanches. It's a blank sheet of paper. There's nothing on it! "You didn't even consider giving me a job!?"

Dazai puts the paper away like it will overshadow his mistake. "Formal training, Chuuya. And I know *just the right person.*" He taps his earpiece, pointedly ignoring Chuuya's accusing glower with a sunny, light-hearted smile. "Send me Kouyou-san, please."

Kouyou.

From what Chuuya remembers last night, it's the woman with the red hair who silently judged his make-up and hair. "What exactly does *formal training* mean?" he asks because nothing that comes to his head sounds good.

"Everything that the streets haven't taught you about business." Dazai waves a casual hand as if he's talking about the weather instead of insulting him. "Numbers. Contacts. How to talk, sit, walk properly. How to present yourself. How to dress. Emotional control. All that buzz."

"I don't need that."

"You most certainly do."

Okay, so maybe Chuuya does. What he spent the last century of his life doing? Dealing with street organizations, other kids like him, broken and nowhere to go except the ruthless labyrinth of the cone street, the occasional robberies, and murders? It was a kingdom of sticks and stones. In comparison, the mafia is an *empire.* A real one.

Chuuya's not about to let Dazai trample all over him, though. He's not a dumb child.

"If you just gave me a fucking job," he snarls, only a good foot now separating him and the bastard boss of the port mafia, "I would do perfectly fine —"

"Too late," Dazai cuts in, tapping his chin. "Kouyou-san is already here, and we don't want to waste her time now, do we? She's a terribly busy woman."

Chuuya's glare ebbs into a frown when he sees Dazai's eyes travel *past* him.

Surely, she isn't already — oh, Chuuya's met with the executive's intense gaze when he spins around. Some skills she must have to walk in here without making a single sound.

Maybe, Chuuya thinks, *training under her won't be that bad.*

"Your new protegé, Ane-san." Dazai nods towards Chuuya without much preamble, already busying himself with a new stack of papers. "Show him the ropes."

"Yes, boss," Kouyou says and gives him a short bow before signaling Chuuya to follow her.

Feeling hesitant because of how fast and wordless this interaction is happening, Chuuya glances back at Dazai, who waves him goodbye with an idle grin. "Go on. Have fun. Don't kill anyone important."

So much for the legendary hellhound of Yokohama.

This is a fucking *kid* with a scarf around his neck.

Kouyou is quick, and Chuuya hurries to catch up to her as they walk out of the office. As soon as the doors fall closed behind them, Kouyou lifts her finger. "I have rules."

Chuuya blinks.

"Rule number one: your earpiece. Your phones. Your keycards. Keep them safe like your life depends on them. Because it does depend on them." Next, she presses a file with papers into his hands. "Documents with crucial numbers and information. Memorize everything, then burn them."

Chuuya's heart hammers in his ears.

Fuck.

How is he supposed to — ?

"Rule number two: if I call you, I expect you to get there as fast as possible. I don't care whether you're dying or a few hundred miles away. You have an ability. Use it.

"Rule number three: you might wear the title of Dazai's husband now, but in reality, you're nothing. A grunt. An inexperienced rookie who has yet to earn any respect. You do what I tell you, write reports, shadow me — *shadow* which means you are quiet, work every night until you pass out, and never complain.

"Rule number four: if I'm sleeping, don't wake me unless someone important is dying, or we're under attack.

"Rule number five: if someone important dies and you could have prevented it, we're going to have problems. Not only would you have gone against the loyalty codex, but you would have woken me up for nothing. Are we clear?"

"Yes, ma'am," Chuuya blurts out, the knowledge that he's supposed to be the second head of the mafia all but forgotten. Dazai called it *training*, but Kouyou makes it sound like *military boot camp*.

Even though Chuuya has to find a quick solution for the literal problem in his hands right now, everything else sounds *good*. Doable.

A way to worm his way inside the port mafia's machinery that has kept it running for so long.

Until now.

Until him.

Kouyou gives him the extended, unclipped version of Higuchi's tour of the tower.

Growing up not knowing how to write or, well, read, Chuuya was forced to rely on memorizing things instead, which is why this is the *easy* part. The mixed-use building is gigantic, even more confusing than cone street, what with the mafia front companies that are settled here, and the actual mafia work behind closed doors, but it's information Chuuya would have killed for not even a month ago.

Here lies the nest, and here is the key to all of it.

Well, not to *all*.

Dazai made it clear that Chuuya's not going to get access to the top floor anytime soon. There is still time, though, and Chuuya intends to use it wisely.

Kouyou's actual destination of their trip is a room on one of the higher floors.

"Boardrooms," she explains when they step into the elevator. "Once you've worked your way high enough to land in the bureaucratic and intern side of the business, you'll spend most of your time there. Planning and discussing numbers."

Chuuya smothers his grimace with a firm nod.

He can do that without having to be an excellent reader, right?

"The meeting we're going to is about a black market auction in two weeks. You'll be meeting some of the most important faces responsible for the money that flows in."

Worrying his lip, Chuuya glances at the woman standing next to him idly. She said that Chuuya's *nothing* to her, but that doesn't mean she wants him to fail. Not when Dazai ordered her to achieve the opposite.

(For whatever unknown reason.)

"Kouyou-san," Chuuya starts, "those people. They must have heard about the sheep. Right?"

The smile that blossoms on her face is sharp, cutting, like thorns. "Everyone here knows about the sheep, lad."

"Aren't they going to be angry? That I'm there?"

"Don't expect anyone to fall to their knees and treat you like the boss." Chuuya kissed that thought goodbye a long time ago. "But orders are orders. The boss wants you to get trained quickly. No one will go out of their way to defy his wishes..." She trails off as if there's an exception to that rule.

"No one at all?" Chuuya questions.

Interesting.

That might be worth looking into later.

"Do not say anything you don't know anything about," Kouyou tells him, ignoring his question. "Don't threaten anyone as you did with Atsushi-kun. The mafia's language is respect and hierarchy. Cross that line one too many times, and you'll face the consequences."

Keeping his mouth shut and listening to some old geezers telling him what to do goes against every principle Chuuya has acquired in his time with the sheep. It's not his way of living. Even if it's for a greater purpose.

What else is he supposed to do, though?

Kouyou's right. Chuuya can only lash out so many times before he ends up accidentally endangering his family.

The elevator doors slide open, leaving no more room for any questions or any hesitation. Kouyou's steps are lengthy and graceful as she leads them across the orbicular, sun-drenched hall and towards one of the several rooms on the other side.

The door gets opened before Kouyou even lifts her hand, and Chuuya follows her inside. The first thing he sees is a wide-eyed grunt in a faded hoodie and jacket that closes the door behind them. Chuuya almost stops dead in his tracks. It's a young man — no, a young boy — rust-colored hair, a scar on his cheek, and a collar around his neck. It feels a little like looking at a mirror image of himself, except that it's a

version of a Chuuya that didn't get lucky enough to get picked up by the sheep and got picked up by the mafia instead. Someone sharply tugs at the sleeve of his jacket, and Chuuya's attention snaps to the three other men around the table. The stares he gets in return are a mix of passive disinterest and cold disdain.

"What's this brat doing here? You know, I don't appreciate strange faces in my meetings, *Ozaki*."

"I don't appreciate a single thing about you, Ace," Kouyou replies as she takes a seat at the table, wordlessly signaling Chuuya to do the same, "and yet I manage to keep these feelings to myself. The boss wants Chuuya-kun here, so that's where he'll be."

The white-haired man's — *Ace* Kouyou called him — lips press into a thin line as he leans back in his seat and snaps his fingers at the boy who has retreated into the corner of the room as if trying to blend into the shadows. "Karma, another cup of coffee. I need something strong to deal with this bullshit."

Chuuya's fists curl where he keeps them hidden in his pocket as he watches Karma scurry out of the room.

"Well, gentlemen, if no one else has any more irrelevant comments to get off their chest, I suppose we should start."

Throughout the next half hour, Chuuya finds out that the other two men present here are both named Rokuro, brothers, and not directly in the port mafia but working for one of the shell companies. He finds out a lot more, too. Locations of warehouses. Names of important people. Routes of the ships transporting the illegal goods for the auction. A whole bunch of information that the government would probably kill to have, and here Chuuya is, suddenly in on all of it.

It feels like a trick somehow.

It feels way too easy to get the entire gold plate shoved under his nose right away, and as much as Ace makes his skin crawl, his distrust in Chuuya is entirely comprehensible.

At one point, Chuuya's thoughts must stray because Kouyou shoves a sheet of paper in front of his nose.

"Chuuya-kun, you'll be responsible for overseeing the delivery from the docks to the auction hall for now."

Chuuya looks down at the words. *Symbols*. These must be more names, more locations, objects, and prices. *Important things.* But to him, they don't make any more sense than a puzzle. "Okay."

"*Okay*?" Ace parrots incredulously before looking at Kouyou as if these two words alone are somehow proof of Chuuya's incompetence.

"What do you want to hear?" Chuuya asks, crossing his arms. "*Yes, boss?* Because as far as I'm aware, that's Dazai and not some greasy-haired bitch called Ace." The words are out before Chuuya can really think any better of it, but as Ace's expression twists into something shocked and offended, nostrils flaring, Chuuya can't be bothered to regret it.

Ace turns to Kouyou. "Ozaki. Are you really going to let him speak to an executive like that?"

"Chuuya-kun here might still need to work on his manners," Kouyou only gives Chuuya one warning glare before she offers Ace a cold smile, "but he does speak the truth. I gave Chuuya orders. He agreed. I don't see why you're making such a fuss about it."

"You're not seriously about to let that *child* oversee one of the most critical parts of the operation?! It's *my* money that'll be lost if this brat betrays us. My money that will vanish if he decides to steal from us."

"I'm not that st—" Chuuya cuts himself off when Kouyou lifts her hand.

"Careful, Ace, before anyone starts thinking that you're working on your own instead of for the mafia."

"Ace isn't entirely wrong to be worried," one of the brothers speaks up with a measuring stare in Chuuya's direction. "That's a lot of responsibility for a — how old are you exactly?"

"Twenty," Chuuya grits out, not mentioning that it's technically a lie. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"You'll be responsible for objects that are worth billions of yen," Rokuro points out.

Chuuya raises his brow. "So?"

Ace rubs his temple and beckons over Karma again, muttering something about a pill for his headache and sake.

"There is such a thing as too much confidence. I suggest you don't treat this lightly. This isn't a gas station robbery that you're about to be responsible for."

"The mafia as an opponent wasn't a gas station robbery either," Chuuya says with a shrug, "but here I am. Still kicking. Just like my people."

Okay, in hindsight, bringing up the sheep's past conflict with the organization he's now supposed to be working for isn't the best idea, but these dudes are starting to get on his nerves. There is a reason why Chuuya is number one on the top of the wanted list in Yokohama. And none of it has ever been a joke.

"If you have concerns, I suggest you take it up with the boss himself." With that, Kouyou stands up, folding her hands together. "Other than that, we are done here. Chuuya."

Right. Right. Collecting the shit ton of papers he acquired over the last hour — arguably more than he ever had in his entire life — Chuuya gets up, refusing to spare Ace or the brothers any parting glances. *So much about keeping his mouth shut and not showing them any disrespect.*

Just as Chuuya steps out of the room, the door falling shut behind him, someone runs into him at full speed, platter, glasses, and liquids clattering to the floor.

"I-I'm so sorry!" the boy stammers out as he kneels down and starts picking up the broken pieces with bare, trembling hands.

"Oi, don't hurt yourself." Chuuya squats down in front of him, the familiar glow of red outlining his skin as he touches the floor. "Karma. Was it?"

Karma's mouth parts watching the broken pieces elevate and form a neat line before floating towards the closest trash can. Then he must remember that Chuuya asked him something, and his gaze snaps to him. "Uh, y-yeah! Karma. You're Chuuya. The king of the sheep. I heard about you when I —" He cuts himself off with a shake of his head. "I heard stories about you."

Chuuya's mouth twitches ever so slightly, even though confusion prevails, especially as he gets a better look at that collar around Karma's neck. It's not like Chuuya's own choker. Not a statement. Not for aesthetics or symbolism. It is what it looks like. A collar. *Chains.*

"I thought mafia grunts were supposed to deliver shit here and there, not be some prick's personal servant?"

The smile Karma offers him is nothing short of brittle. "I don't belong to the mafia. Not really. I'm Ace's."

"Wha—"

"Chuuya-kun," Kouyou's voice suddenly calls out. "You don't have time for idle chit-chat."

Fuck.

Chuuya gets back to his feet, offering Karma an apologetic smile. "Work calls."

"It always does," Karma replies with a shrug before dusting off his pants. "And you were right, by the way." Chuuya frowns. Huh? "Ace's hair *is* greasy." With that, he turns around, probably to get a replacement for the drink he spilled. Chuuya jogs over to where Kouyou's waiting in front of the elevator, not wanting to test any more of her patience. Not after she was on his side earlier.

"I did tell you my rules, so you would *listen* to them," Kouyou says even if her tone isn't as sharp as he expected it to be. "Don't make me wait again."

"Sorry, sorry," Chuuya mutters. Then when she narrows her eyes, he holds up his hands. "I apologize, ma'am?"

"You are going to be a lot of work. I have no idea what Dazai is thinking."

That seems to be the case with pretty much anyone. Unfortunately, for the boss of an entire organization, Dazai doesn't seem to share his reasons with many people.

"The boy. Karma," Chuuya glances at Kouyou. "Why is he collared?"

Keeping her gaze planted on the doors of the elevator, Kouyou lifts her chin. "That is not what you should be concerned about right now." Chuuya opens his mouth to argue, but she's quicker. "Instead, I suggest you read the papers I gave you. Carefully. A few dozen times. I defended you because I know better than to question the boss' orders, but that doesn't mean I don't have concerns of my own as well. Underground auctions are some of the most profitable events of the

year for us. It is most crucial to be on high alert." The elevator dings as it stops on the tenth floor. Kouyou looks at Chuuya. "Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Translation: he's going to be in a lot of trouble if anything goes wrong.

Chuuya's eyes drift to the papers, all the information hidden behind a sign system that he has no access to. He *already* is in trouble. But he can still dig his way out of it. Somehow. He's made it nineteen years without reading. He'll manage now too.

"Yes, Kouyou-san. I understand."

***

Chuuya doesn't get back to the apartment until sunset, having spent most of the day following Kouyou around, memorizing everything she told him, and trying to cause as little trouble as possible.

When he finally does, though, he first ransacks the kitchen for something to eat and coffee.

The latter takes a bit longer because he keeps searching for instant coffee, cursing every damn drawer and shelf that doesn't have it — why have so many of them if they don't even have coffee? — before he realizes that the fancy thing on top of the marble counter is a coffee machine.

And after a cup of it, he realizes that it's a hundred times better, too. None of that bitter taste that he forced himself to get down his throat when sleep was scarce, and work was not. Just like right now, he supposes, looking at the spread-out papers on the table. Chuuya doubts he will get any sleep tonight either when he has to somehow learn an entire language all by himself.

He has gotten bits and pieces of the information in these documents from Kouyou, tried to assign them to their written equals too, but there was no subtle way to go about it with Kouyou watching him like a hawk.

"Okay, Chuuya," he mutters to himself, grabbing the dictionary he snagged from the library — because, of course, the mafia has a library, "you can do this. You survived government experiments. A hundred conflicts with the mafia. A few dozen fistfights. Getting chased by rabid dogs. A fire-wielding ability user trying to kill you for stealing his wallet. An angry father. What's learning to write and read

compared to that, huh?"

***

One hour later.

He can't do it.

He keeps trying to copy words, but that's only useful when he doesn't know the meaning and when there are a million of them. Chuuya will never learn how to read, let alone memorize all the documents in time.

But it's not like he has another choice.

Chuuya can't allow himself to make mistakes right now, in his first days here, every gesture and twitch of muscle carefully observed and assessed. And asking the sheep — that's out of the question, too.

It's been hard pretending that their leader isn't illiterate, but he's carried this dirty, shameful secret with him for so long that asking for help all of a sudden makes him feel a little sick. So no, he can't do that.

Instead, he does what he does best: pushing through it.

It turns out that when Kouyou said *if I call for you, I expect you to get there as fast as possible*, she meant it because, at five in the morning, Chuuya's new phone buzzes with an incoming call, Kouyou's cool voice on the other end informing him that he's needed for a job.

Chuuya gulps down another coffee, brushes his hair, and puts it in a high ponytail before rushing out of the door, light-headed and buzzing with the brain fog that comes from lack of sleep. Kouyou's waiting for him outside the building next to a normal-looking car.

"One of our delivery boys got delayed last minute," she says, opening the door for him. "It's the grey backpack in the trunk. The driver knows where to go. Be quick. No stops or detours. You get there. You deliver. Done. If, in any case, you get stopped and questioned, you say nothing. You only give them this." Chuuya frowns at the business card she hands over. "It's a lawyer. Don't say anything until they come. They will get you out."

"That happens?"

"Everything is possible, and the force is always looking to find something."

"In and out," Chuuya repeats, trying to stifle a yawn. "That's it?"

Kouyou nods.

Well, Chuuya would rather sleep or see his fucking friends again or literally do anything other than the mafia's grunt work, but it seems simple enough.

His driver is a bald man that doesn't spare him any words as he starts the car and pulls into the street. Chuuya watches blurry street signs and shop windows with neon lighting fly by, trying not to pay attention to the suffocating feeling that wraps around his ribcage, tightening and tightening and tightening. It's a little maddening to be bound by invisible shackles.

No matter how uncomfortable his bed was that he slept on, and no matter how shitty his coffee tasted, at least Chuuya was *free.*

It's a silent, fifteen-minute ride, and by the time the car pulls to a stop in front of a two-story house in the middle of a deserted street, the first rays of the sun are starting to break through the darkness. Chuuya's about to ask whether this is it, then thinks better of it. No stops, Kouyou said. Obviously, it's their destination.

Wordlessly, Chuuya gets out of the car and opens the trunk.

The backpack in question is hard to miss, so he grabs the thing and spins around to —

Thud.

Chuuya only feels the beginning of searing, staggering pain cracking his skull open before he slumps forward.

Then darkness takes over.

Consciousness tugs at his mind, first gently, then mercilessly, making Chuuya come to it again with a slight groan.

What is this pain?

Opening his eyes, he has to blink several times to make sense of his surroundings. Something dark and grimy and small. Something that

smells like rust and mold.

He was supposed to do a delivery. He was on the way out of the car and then —

Panic rises inside him. Sharp and fast. Chuuya jerks up and finds himself on the floor, hands bound. He searches *for the tainted sorrow* and — he comes up *empty*.

It's like his ability's just *gone*.

"What the hell?"

"You're awake," a voice suddenly says behind him. "Then let's begin."

The man — no, the two men that come into view are dressed in night-blue uniforms, and Chuuya's brows instantly tug into a frown.

Feds? Really?

They don't look like the ones Chuuya has dealt with in the past, but he has heard about special units that focus on organized crime. What he didn't know is that the state allows knocking someone out and —

"Who do you work for?" the taller one of the two asks. His face, graced with a thick scar running down his one eye, betrays no emotion whatsoever, radiating pure ice.

Don't say a word, Kouyou told him, right? Chuuya's lips press together as he glares up at them.

The man takes a step closer. "I'll ask again, and if you insist on making it difficult, I will make the decision easier for you."

"Look," the other one suddenly says, and Chuuya's overcome with the odd sensation that he doesn't belong in that uniform. Not with his bleached hair and the pink streaks. Maybe that's stereotyping, *but* — "We already have a lead. All we need is tangible proof, okay? So give us a name, locations, anything, and we'll work out a deal that will protect you from them."

Chuuya's thoughts race through his head as he considers his options here. He has names. He has locations. He has an entire empire of dirt on the mafia that could probably buy him a one-way ticket to freedom, but Chuuya didn't spend his whole life dealing with shitheads to be convinced so easily. There is a larger game at stake

here.

"Give it up," the taller one says. "He won't talk. Not unless I make him."

"Last chance," the white-haired guy tells him with something akin to a grimace.

What is this? Chuuya thinks. *Good cop, bad cop?*

"Time's up."

Chuuya sees the fist coming, expects it, but it doesn't make the pain hurt any less when it comes crashing down on his face, numbing every thought with the throbbing that pulses through him.

Usually, *for the tainted sorrow* is quick to heal him, not instantly, but it slows down injuries, protects Chuuya; without it, everything feels rawer, louder, more keen.

"Who do you work for?"

Chuuya lifts his head only to bare his teeth. "Fuck you."

"So you do speak." The man's fingers fist in Chuuya's shirt before he downright punches him against a wall behind them. "Give us a name then."

The utter nonchalance of every word makes this entire ordeal that much more frustrating.

"We know who you are, Chuuya," the other voice says. "We can protect you. Just cooperate. Give us *something*."

Chuuya can't give anything but a sick gasp of breath as his head tosses back from another blow.

"Who do you work for?"

"Give us a name, Chuuya!"

"Talk."

"Even something as simple as a warehouse would be enough!"

Their voices blur together into one endless stream of noises that Chuuya blends out as his lungs burn to catch up with his shallow

breathing until —

"We can protect you and the sheep."

Chuuya's eyes flutter open.

The sheep.

Wasn't that his only goal before Shirase got arrested and everything went to shit? Keeping them safe? Protected, instead of making them work for an organization like the mafia?

It'd be so easy. So incredibly easy to open his mouth, tell these fuckers what they want to hear, and be done with it.

Except nothing in life is ever that simple.

It's *too* easy.

Too convenient.

"I already said what I have to say," Chuuya hisses. "*Fuck you.*"

The man in front of him sighs like he's stepping around a piece of dog shit on the street. A minor nuisance. He blindly holds out his hand, and the other guy, looking upset as he does, places a gun in his hand.

"Our boss has no use for useless people like you."

"I guess I'll have to call him and deliver the news," he hears the other guy mutter. "He won't be happy."

The barrel of the gun points straight at Chuuya's face. He lifts his chin, jaw muscles clenching.

"One."

"Last chance, Chuuya. Come on. We can *help* you."

"Two."

It's not about loyalty to the mafia. It's not about the clear instructions and warnings Kouyou gave him either.

"Any last words?"

It's about a voice inside his head calling *bullshit.*

"You're not going to do it."

The man pulls the trigger.

Despite his intuition being 95% sure something is *off* about all this, Chuuya's eyes still fall shut in silent prayer when it happens. He doubts he'd get into heaven with all the blood on his hands, but maybe something in-between? A place where he can rest? Find some peace?

Maybe he actually does. Because it's *silent*. No pain or blood or —

Chuuya opens his eyes.

The two men look at him in unhurried silence.

He was right?

Then the mouth of the white-haired guy twitches suspiciously as he crosses the distance between them to hold the phone in his hand to Chuuya's ear. "Our boss wants to talk to you."

Chuuya's pulse is still hammering loudly inside him when he does, so much that the voice on the other end of the line gets almost drowned out by it.

Almost.

"Hey, Chuuya."

Chapter 3: Pressure Points

Chapter Notes

> hi there, super sorry for the long wait but i've been finishing my college semester in the last month! i'm done now, so hopefully i can update more frequently :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Hey, Chuuya.”

Dazai.

It’s Dazai.

“What the fuck*?!”* Chuuya snaps into the speaker, fingers shaking with the adrenaline that has bottled up inside him in the last few minutes.

“Do you like your new playmates? Their names are Albatross and Iceman.” The white-haired guy offers him a wide grin and a wave. The other one lights up a cigarette in the corner of whatever shithole they’re in. “You’re going to cross paths quite often in the future.”

"Playmates?! They almost killed me!"

“No, they tested your loyalty,” Dazai corrects softly. “Or did you think the mafia lets everyone walk in and out of it as they please?”

Well, no, but —

Chuuya blows out an angry breath through his teeth, trying and failing to smother the roaring in his hand. “Letting some asshole beat me up. Real nice of you, boss.”

On the other end, Dazai chuckles. “You’re a smart boy. I knew you wouldn’t be stupid enough to betray us.”

“Then why test me?!”

“Because you have to work with everyone else as well, and that’s only possible if there’s a foundation of trust between the two parties.”

Chuuya shakes his head silently before remembering something. Something crucial. “What about the sheep? Did you do the same with them?!”

“Ah, yes, your little lambs. I should be hearing from them any minute now.”

“If you so much a—”

“Take a nap now, Chuuya. I’ll see you tonight and tell you all about it.”

“Tonight?” Chuuya repeats.

Dazai hums. “Your initiation tattoo, remember? I say you earned it. Welcome to the port mafia.”

The line goes dead before Chuuya has time to reply. The guy — Albatross, he thinks, locks his phone and slides it into his pocket, then places his hands on his hips. “So that was fun, eh?”

Chuuya’s eye twitches as he looks up at him. “Fun?! You — ah, fuck, never mind. Just get me out of these handcuffs! What kind of handcuffs are they, by the way?! My ability —”

“— is temporarily nullified,” Albatross says, squatting down next to Chuuya to free him. “They’re prototypes, but pretty impressive, right?”

“*Annoying*. That’s what they are.”

“Hey, that’s hurtful, Chuuya. Our folks worked hard on them!”

As Chuuya gets to his feet, finally feeling like himself again as soon as he feels the rush of *for the tainted sorrow* crash through him, he shoots Albatross a glare. “Don’t call me Chuuya. You don’t even know me aside from this little theatre performance you and your asshole friend put on.”

The asshole friend in question doesn’t even bother to acknowledge him. Instead, he turns and opens the door of the container — so that’s where they are.

Albatross throws his arm around Chuuya. “And we’re going to change that. How about grabbing a bite for breakfast?”

“No.”

“C’mon, you must be hungry!”

As if on cue, Chuuya’s traitorous stomach decides to growl. “I have

enough food at home, and I don't want to go anywhere with you. I don't even like you."

"That's what Dazai said too at first, and now look at me! In charge of his infamous husband. He didn't even invite me to the wedding. Can you believe that?"

Physically, Chuuya continues to ignore him, but mentally, Chuuya's doing gymnastics to reconsider the new information. If Albatross is close to Dazai — and that is what he's implying here — then getting close to Albatross in return might be Chuuya's best shot at worming his way inside the nest.

Well, technically, he's already inside, but it will take time and careful planning to lay the foundation for the total and utter destruction of the port mafia.

"Fine," Chuuya ends up huffing out, pushing Albatross away from him to maintain authenticity." But only because I'll have to hitch a ride with you anyway."

"You will not regret this decision, Nakahara Chuuya," Albatross tells him with a dopey grin before catching up to Ice Man and harassing him instead. "Eh, did you hear that, Frosty? Chuuya's going to McDonald's with us!"

They end up in the drive-through because both Albatross and Ice Man are still wearing uniforms, and there are still bruises forming on Chuuya's face. That doesn't stop Albatross from talking about a mile a minute about quite literally everything but important information.

The worst thing is that Chuuya even finds himself accidentally laughing one or two times, although he spends most of the ride thinking he's about to die all over again because of the guy's recklessly fast driving.

When they pull up in front of the tower, Albatross grabs Chuuya's phone before he can protest. "I like your outfit, by the way. Very badass."

"Your boss doesn't seem to think the same. And what the hell are you doing with my phone?"

"Saving myself in your contacts, duh." Albatross stretches out his arm, pointing the camera at the two of them and holding up a peace sign as the flash goes off. Chuuya continues scowling. "And Dazai's a grumpy

old man stuck in a twenty-something-year-old body."

Grumpy old man instead of the demon prodigy, huh?

"Here," Albatross says, handing over his phone. "If you ever need a fast escape, I'm your man."

"Good to know," Chuuya huffs, grabbing the door handle to get the hell out of here, but not before glancing at Ice Man in the backseat, torn between cursing him out and trying to stay civilized.

Ice Man speaks first. "If you expect to hear an apology from me, you will be sitting here for a long time." He takes a drag off his cigarette, tapping the ash off it outside the open window. "Welcome to the mafia, though. I have a feeling things are about to get interesting."

Back at the apartment, Chuuya's tempted to hop into bed right then and there and pass the fuck out but — he's supposed to have Kouyou's documents memorized by — by today, actually, and who knows when she will call for him again. Maybe in an hour. Or maybe in ten minutes.

For the tainted sorrow is already working on his injuries, but Chuuya grabs a pack of ice from the freezer anyways and sits down at the table — one that's supposed to be used for dining, what with the view over Yokohama's skyline. Chuuya needs it for studying, though.

Before the delivery Chuuya discovered that watching the TV with subtitles might be quite useful, so he switches it on and starts writing furiously. He writes and listens, and he writes some more and —

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The sound of something buzzing jolts him awake.

For a few terrifying moments, Chuuya thinks he has the misfortune of sleeping under a hornet's nest again, his body kicking into action before his brain does. Then he realizes that he's inside, safe and sound, and drooling on the table instead.

It's dark outside too, which means that he slept through the entire day.

Fuck.

The phone stops buzzing, and Chuuya looks at the caller ID. An

unsaved number. Considering, Kouyou's name that he memorized was already saved there, and it's not Albatross either, it could have been only so many people.

Somewhere in the apartment, he hears the electrical hum of the elevator and —

Tonight.

Dazai said he'd do the tattoo *tonight*.

So right now.

Jumping to his feet, Chuuya frantically starts stacking his papers, documents, and the dictionary on a pile that will hopefully look unsuspicious and not like a miserable attempt at learning to read and write. He finishes just in time, now straightening out his hair and clothes, when the port mafia boss strolls into the living room.

"Morning, sunshine," is the first thing that Dazai says, and Chuuya's face immediately bleeds into a scowl. Is it that obvious that he just woke up? "You got a few —" Dazai points at his own face, clearly trying to stifle a grin. "— sleeping lines there."

"Oh."

"Hm. Rested enough for the tattoo? It's going to take a while."

About that. Chuuya keeps expecting someone else to show up, perhaps a tattoo artist that works for the mafia, but no one else comes. It's just the two of them. "Are you going to do the tattooing?"

"That is what I said, yes."

"I thought you'd give it to me symbolically, not... physically."

The horror on Chuuya's face must show because Dazai places a hand over his heart mockingly.

"You don't trust me to ink you? You wound me."

"Yeah, well, you clearly don't trust me either. Speaking of, every single member of the sheep better be unharmed, or so help me go—"

Dazai lifts his hand. "All in due time. We'll have so much time to talk about it tonight. Why spoil the surprise?"

“Spoil the surprise?! You’re talking about my friends and —”

“— the most important people in your life,” Dazai mock-exclaims as if he has heard the phrase a thousand times already, all while strolling through the kitchen and starting to open and close cabinets, shamelessly snooping before he must realize they’re just as empty as they were before Chuuya arrived here. “Don’t you ever get tired of only having one personality trait, Chuuya? Live a little. They are not your planet earth, and you are not their moon.”

Sure, he’s his own person, but the sheep always have and will come *first*.

“I know this is hard for you to understand when you’re constantly isolated in that barricaded top floor of yours where nothing can touch you, but in the sheep, *I* fight *for* them. Not the other way around.”

Turning away from the fridge, Dazai gazes at him, his head tilted curiously. Though, what stands out are the black pools of his eyes, so dark that they seem to absorb all light. It’s an expression at odds with itself. Completely illogical. And Chuuya finds himself digging his nails into the skin of his palm to return the stare without looking away — even if every single survival instinct that he picked up on the streets is telling him to run and be fast. “You think I haven’t made sacrifices for my people?”

“I’m sure you’ve done a fair share of sacrificing,” Chuuya grits out. “Just not anything that ever affected you.”

Dazai’s curved mouth takes a sharp turn before it bleeds into something lighter to look at it — breezy amusement. Even if they both know how false it is.

“Lucky me to have such a devoted husband then, eh? The mafia does love blood-thick, death-over-life loyalty, and they will love the ink being proof of that.” He curls two fingers to signal Chuuya to come over.

Getting called over like a fucking dog is humiliating, but Chuuya knows no amount of stalling will change the outcome of tonight. He will get that tattoo. And it will bring him closer to his goal. “Has your pretty little head been wondering what’s behind the door?”

“What door?” Chuuya asks, following Dazai as he leads them down the dim-lit hallway — the one on the opposite side of the bedroom.

“This one, of course.” Dazai theatrically grabs the handle, and when it remains locked, he glances at Chuuya, though his overdramatic grin ebbs away into genuine confusion. “You haven’t even tried to have a peep?”

Chuuya scowls at Dazai, then at the door. “It’s locked.”

“Precisely.” For a few moments, they stare at each other, each one confused over something unsaid the other doesn’t understand. At last, Dazai lets out a loud sigh, shaking his head in disappointment. “Really? You didn’t explore the apartment? Check for any bugs?”

Well…

Chuuya did take a personal tour on the first night after Higuchi left. Considering he has constant access to it, he figured most of it isn’t necessarily crucial information that he’d need to discover anyway, including this… strange locked room.

“I was busy,” Chuuya tells him with a shrug.

“Busy,” Dazai parrots, sliding a hand into the pocket of his dark slacks to retrieve a key card. “What’s Kouyou been doing with you? Twenty-four-hour interrogation training?”

It’s not Kouyou who has been keeping him occupied but Chuuya’s attempts at finding a solution to his illiteracy, and there’sno way in hell that he’s going to tell Dazai that. Thankfully, Dazai chooses this moment to unlock his stupid room.

“And?” Dazai asks expectantly. “What do you think?”

“It’s a room.” Chuuya steps inside, not really sure what all the build-up was for. “Nice… walls?”

That must be the wrong answer considering Dazai’s giddy expression once again falters at the seams. However, it’s quickly replaced by a blank, impenetrable slate. “It’s our tattoo studio. Well, it could be one day.”

A little concerned, Chuuya raises his brows. “So you don’t do this very often?”

“I’ve done it enough times,” Dazai drawls, walking over to one of the ink-black shelves and starting to unload things and instruments on it that Chuuya supposes are needed for… this. “Don’t worry.”

Not like he has a choice, Chuuya thinks as he goes to sit down on the tattoo chair in the middle of the room. “Fine. Whatever. Let’s just get this over with.”

“Will you be able to handle shaving your back on your own?” Dazai asks nonchalantly as he places a container with the word BIOHAZARD on it in thick red letters.

“Hah?!”

“Your back and your shoulders,” Dazai only turns his head to offer him an impish grin. “That’s the place of your tattoo. They have to be shaved.”

Chuuya had no idea about that. It’s a problem but that’s okay. He can fix it. “I can do it,” he announces, getting to his feet. “Just gimme ten minutes.”

“Uh-uh. You know where to find me if you do need help.”

“I won’t!”

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Chuuya needs help.

He managed to shave his lower and upper back just fine, but there are a few spots that he can’t properly reach whether he tries from above, from below, or from the sides. All he manages to do is fucking cutting himself.

Considering Dazai’s about to ink him for god knows how many hours, it’s not ideal. However, leaving the bathroom and asking Dazai for help?

That’s gotta be more painful than a few delicate shaving cuts.

“C’mon,” Chuuya mutters to himself as he twists his neck to try and get a look at his half-shaved cream-covered back in the mirror, uselessly wiggling the razor between his fingers, “you’ve done so much harder things than — than this, fuck!”

It’s fruitless.

Which means…

He takes a deep breath for mental strength and patience before he

kicks open the door and stomps out of the bathroom and down the hallway to Dazai's stupid fucking tattoo studio.

Thankfully, Chuuya doesn't even have to say anything.

It takes Dazai merely to lift his head and take one good look at him before nodding at the tattoo chair with the self-satisfaction of the stupid motherfucker that he is.

"Not a word," Chuuya warns him when he obediently sits down and offers Dazai the razor.

His only response is a quiet chuckle; then Dazai goes to work.

Even though he's quick and efficient, taking care of some of the other spots Chuuya must have missed earlier without so much as a teasing remark, Chuuya can't help but be achingly aware of every place where his fingers graze naked skin.

The life he led before this never allowed for much… intimacy, let alone romance. Every touch that Chuuya felt before was laced with intent, even in the burning dumpster fire that his 'relationship' with Luca ended up being.

So this — the quiet movements of Dazai behind him, the soft sound of their breaths, suddenly feels a thousand times more never-wrecking than kissing him at that altar a few days ago.

And, it's been a while.

Chuuya feels himself exhale with relief when Dazai announces that he's done, using the opportunity of washing and drying his back in the bathroom as an excuse to collect himself.

He can only hide in there for so long, though… it's already pretty late, and Chuuya doesn't want to make it a habit to get up at noon.

"I'm going to show you the design now," Dazai tells him once he's back.

"Before we can get to the tattooing, we'll first have to place the stencil on your back, see that the size and positioning are right. It's like a fake tattoo, if you will."

"Great," Chuuya mutters, sitting down. "Can't wait to see what I'll have to carry on my back for the rest of my life."

“This. You’ll be carrying this.”

Chuuya’s lashes flutter slowly as he takes in the meticulous design that Dazai holds up to him.

Wings.

A pair of feathery, thick wings descending up, up, up — covering shoulders and a part of his arms, Chuuya supposes. Right below the part where the feathers come together, there are spikes, sharp and lethal just like the choker Chuuya wears around his neck; out of the whole thing, a spine comes out with a few spare ribs here and there. And on the top center of the entire thing, there’s a sun, emitting ink-black particles.

Looking at it, a peculiar feeling overcomes him, like he’s seen it before — no, Chuuya hasn’t, but it feels like he should have, a painfully vivid deja-vu that leaves him scatter-brained.

In the end, what he asks is, “why?”

Dazai’s head tilts curiously.

“Why come up with this design?” Chuuya tries. “What does it mean?”

“Your ability. It allows you to fly, no?”

“Yeah.”

Dazai just nods.

“What?” Chuuya huffs. “That’s it? I can fly, so I get wings?”

The strangest thing happens.

Dazai ghosts one lone finger over the design with a smile on his face — a smile so hollow that it’s like witnessing Dazai fight something invisible, something no one else can see. “You couldn’t possibly understand.”

It’s all procedure after that.

As odd as the tattoo makes him feel, Chuuya finds that he actually likes it, which, he knows, is not something he’s supposed to be thinking when it’s only a necessity to make the mafia believe that Chuuya is okay with all this, but… he figures it won’t hurt to see the good sides of things every once in a while. At least, someday, Chuuya

will be able to look at himself in the mirror and see the physical proof of everything he did to get the sheep their freedom.

When Chuuya takes off his shirt, he ignores the treacherous quiver of muscles spasming inside him.

Dazai slaps some weird liquid on his back, shoulders, and arms, then carefully applies the paper with the design — stencil is what he called it. After ensuring that the size, position, and everything else is fine, Dazai starts putting ink into tiny little buckets. Chuuya gets himself a bottle of water from the kitchen in case he gets thirsty during the procedure.

Chuuya's heart knocks loudly against his rib cage when he finally gets to lie down on the tattoo chair. Dazai, on the other hand, is silence personified as he adjusts the tattoo gun.

And then —

"Are you ready?"

"Yeah," Chuuya breathes out, letting his eyes fall shut, "I am."

He feels something creamy and oily on his back first; only then does the tattoo gun start buzzing quietly.

The first press of the needle against his skin is — it's not exactly painful, but not that pleasant either. Just weird. After a few moments, Dazai wipes off the patch and lotions another one before the tattoo gun comes into play again.

For a while, it goes like this. Lotion, inking, wiping clean the stretch of skin.

Once Chuuya gets used to the new sensation of the needle piercing his skin, the monotony of the movements almost bleeds into something soothing. The muscles in his body start to relax slowly, sinking into the chair underneath.

Maybe Dazai notices him nodding off because, after some time, he asks, "How was your first day?"

Chuuya has to drag his eyes open to clear some of that warm fog in his head. "You mean before you had your men almost shoot me?"

"Yes." Dazai doesn't sound apologetic at all.

Chuuya exhales with a huff. “Fine, I guess. Kouyou showed me around and introduced me to a bunch of people. I’m in charge of overseeing the delivery from the docks to the auction hall next week.”

He doesn’t know why he actually tells Dazai all this but it must be the weird intimacy of this situation that makes the word tumble out of him this easily.

Dazai hums as he continues to work. “You nervous?”

“What? No!”

“It’s fine to be. The auction is important. Just don’t let anyone see, and you’ll be fine.”

Chuuya glares half-heartedly at the wall in front of him. “Duh, that man — Ace. He’s annoying enough as it is.”

“Ace is a slimy bastard.”

“Uh,” Chuuya barely holds in the surprised laughter that wants to burst out of him — and only because he doesn’t want to accidentally move too much and be responsible for a messed up tattoo that he’ll have to bear. “Then why’d you make him an executive?”

“He was already one before I became the boss,” Dazai tells him casually, “and seizing that position was already delicate enough without getting rid of the executives that I personally find to be a waste of breathing space.”

Right.

Dazai hasn’t been the boss for that long — something that’s hard to imagine given how lightly he treats his position, but Chuuya remembers the rumors that were spreading in the streets at that time.

The former boss was assassinated by his right hand.

A demon possessed the old boss.

A strange ‘accident’ led to the changes in the port mafia.

What Chuuya remembers, even more, are the months after. The mafia had been ruthless before, of course, but with their new boss, their power just *exploded*.

The courts, distribution, banks, urban development — there’s not a

single institution, not only within Yokohama but the entire Kanto region that doesn't have mafia-black blood running through it anymore; the mafia's forces grown to rival even those of the damn government.

It became all but impossible to deal with anyone on the street without ending up staring down the barrel of a mafia gun at the end of the day. It's safe to say that getting by in the last two years was a pain in the ass and all that came into fruition... because of the man that is currently sitting above Chuuya with a tattoo gun in his hand.

"So," Chuuya says, "did you really kill the boss before you?"

It's a shot in the dark — a dangerous one, at that, but Chuuya has a feeling that the tightrope he's walking isn't as brittle as everyone assumes it to be.

If Dazai's in any way surprised by that question, it doesn't show, his movements as smooth and precise as ever. "And what if I did?"

"Nothing," Chuuya replies honestly. "I'm just curious."

"Whether I murdered my predecessor in cold blood or whether he became a victim to soldiers looking for absolution doesn't matter. Not really. In the end, this was the only way —" It sounds like there is another part to that sentence like there is more, but Dazai trails off and leaves it unsaid.

Again, an eerie feeling swirls through Chuuya as if he's standing too close to a painting to see the whole picture, but whenever he tries to take a step back, an invisible wall keeps him there, keeps him blind and in the dark.

That's what evokes Chuuya to ask the thing that he really needs to know. "So about the sheep." When Dazai only continues humming innocently, Chuuya shakes his head. "Oh, c'mon. We've got an entire night ahead of us. Why do you insist on dragging it out, huh?" Unless Dazai is hesitant because the answer won't please Chuuya… "Unless you did something to them?!"

"Relax. Your lambs are safe and sound."

"So talk!"

"Almost all of them passed the test."

“Almost?”

“Mmm. Three of them gave up valuable information.”

“Which ones?”

“Shougo, Akira and... someone named De Luca.”

“And what did you do to them?” Chuuya snaps.

“Nothing.”

“Yeah, right, like I’m supposed to believe that?!”

“Trust me, Chuuya darling, if I didn’t risk the possibility of you going berserk as soon as somebody touches your precious members, I would have disposed of the traitors the moment they opened their chatty mouths. As it is, I need you, so yes, they’re safe and untouched, but will have my men keep an extra eye on them from now on. I’m patient, but I’m not stupid.”

Chuuya takes a few moments to process his words.

I need you.

It does make sense if you consider that Dazai has always been rumored to be this all-encompassing genius, so of course, he’d think far ahead, but one question remains, and oh, that question is like the glowing neon sign of one of the casinos in the arcade district.

“Why go through all this?” he asks. “You need me? For what? What the hell are you planning?!”

Instead of a reply, Chuuya feels the firm pressure of two fingers pushing against the base of his neck and force his head back down. “Careful. We don’t want to mess up your tattoo.”

“Fuck the tattoo,” Chuuya mutters, even if he does make sure not to move too much. “Just tell me. Why did you want this truce when you probably could have found another way to get rid of the sheep?” Fuck, they apparently even have ability-nullifying wristbands. Chuuya doesn’t mention them so that Dazai won’t get even more ideas, but the fact remains.

“It’s tiring,” he hears Dazai reply. “Being the boss. Everyone always wants something from me. There is always a problem needing to be fixed. And it’s much more paperwork than you could possibly

imagine. So... I decided to get myself a husband who will do all the work for me."

Tiring? That doesn't sound like the infamous demon prodigy that turned a kingdom of blood into an empire.

What a load of bullshit.

"Now what about you, though," Dazai adds before Chuuya can tell him what exactly he thinks of his lame explanation. "The king of the sheep. Agreeing to marry into the mafia without so much as an attempt at a fight." Chuuya feels the need to shift, but he stifles it by digging his nails into the skin of his palms. "It does sound like an excellent opportunity to take down the big bad by poisoning him with your own flesh, doesn't it? Learn everything there is to know. Get close to the people. Make them trust you. And then, boom." Dazai's voice is a soft caress. "You *strike*."

Has Chuuya been a thoughtless idiot all this time? Has Dazai been aware of his true intentions from day one?

Maybe so, but right now, he's in a pretty vulnerable position, back exposed, allowing him to pierce his skin with a tattoo gun over and over, and still, Dazai hasn't struck. He already had a thousand opportunities to kill Chuuya, but he hasn't, which means there is something that he wants — that he needs from him.

And it sure as hell is not a helping hand for paperwork.

And even though being in this position — Chuuya's life and the fate of the sheep in the hands of a mere hunch — makes a chilled shiver creep down his spine, it also feels a lot like diving off a skyscraper with only the trust in himself and his abilities, and that?

Chuuya likes it. He thrives on it.

"Sounds like a great plan," he breathes out after a moment. "Too bad, no one is stupid enough to think the big bad wolf wouldn't find out."

Above him, Dazai exhales loudly. "A shame, really. It could have been fun."

Or a complete disaster.

Whatever Dazai wants with him, he is also aware that Chuuya's not here to spend the rest of his life happily working for the mafia, which

means that every attempt at corrupting this place, every word and gesture will be anticipated and countered with a hostile chess move.

No pressure.

The weight of the weeks and months ahead of him, as well as the rhythmic movements of Dazai's hands working on his back and shoulders, let Chuuya's eyelids grow heavy with fatigue. He doesn't allow himself to sleep, not properly anyway, but he lets his eyes fall shut and lets his thoughts wander in the drowsy silence that encompasses the room. It's not until the permanent buzzing of the tattoo gun stops and doesn't turn on again that Chuuya realizes they're done.

Dazai rolls away on his chair and starts cleaning his instruments. "I'll leave you some instructions on how to take care of the tattoo until our next session."

"Our next session?"

Dazai's eyes glimmer with amusement. "You didn't think a few hours was all it's going to take, right?"

Coming to an upright position, Chuuya lets out a vexed breath. "No, of course not." His back doesn't really hurt, but he can definitely feel that someone has been working on it, so he stretches his neck and arms and lets it sit for a few moments before saying, "I want to see it."

Dazai grabs one of the portable mirrors and motions him to turn to the big, tall one fixed on the wall across from the bed. Chuuya turns around, ending up facing Dazai and the mirror he's holding up to let Chuuya see his own back.

He's not sure what he expected. A sudden derivation from the design, or perhaps the toddler's version of it, but this —

It's a perfect execution of the stencil.

"How did you get so good at drawing?" Chuuya finds himself wondering out loud.

"I have a lot of time," Dazai says before lowering the mirror again and placing it back on one of the shelves.

Chuuya scoffs. "Didn't you say that being the boss is tiring just a few hours ago? How does that leave with you lots of time?"

“Everything becomes tediously easy when you do it enough times.” Dazai’s lips form a smile, but his one eye remains dark and lifeless. “You will understand soon enough. Trust me.”

Chuuya doubts that he will find any of the tasks given here relaxing anytime soon. Easy? Probably. That doesn’t mean shit, though, when you’re in enemy territory, constantly surrounded by people that want you dead, and going head to head in a game of cat and mouse with a brilliant-minded genius who specializes in methodical torture. It’s not relaxing or easy or a space to discover your hidden strengths and talents. Suffocating. That’s what it is.

As promised, Dazai gives him a hand-written list with aftercare instructions, so for once, Chuuya is grateful when Dazai adds some verbal explanations, saving him the time to find out how to care for a fresh tattoo somehow else.

By the time, Dazai looks like he’s ready to leave as he gets to his feet, Chuuya’s mind is too fogged with sleepiness to prevent Dazai from pausing by the table that Chuuya has been studying at earlier in the living room on his way out, one hand reaching out to grab one of the papers there and —

“Chuuya,” he says. “What’s this?”

“That’s —”

Oh god.

Oh no.

“— none of your damn business,” Chuuya snaps and tries to steal back the paper with his miserable attempts at learning the Japanese language. But Dazai is tall with unfairly long arms, and he’s also a gigantic asshole who holds it as far away from Chuuya as possible.

“Nuh-uh, I think it is.”

“Give it back, you—”

“*Fire. Reports. Ten. Gr-*” His brows pinch together. “—*grund*? Why are there a dozen random words written on here?”

“Because I like writing down random words,” Chuuya says without a beat and finally manages to snatch the paper away. “It stimulates my brain. Now get out of my apartment.”

Dazai's eyes are already narrowed, though; his expression could only be described as calculating. "Chuuya," he finally says and grabs the dictionary that's also lying on the table, flipping it open on a random page. "What does this say?"

Fuck.

Chuuya glances at the word that Dazai's finger is pointing at, then redirects his glare back at his face. "It says *eat shit and die."*

"Not quite." Dazai takes a step closer, barging into Chuuya's personal space like he's the fucking owner of it. "If one of my people that is responsible for high-risk missions cannot read, I need to know."

Chuuya's lips flatten into a thin, angry line. Why did it have to be *Dazai* of all people to discover this little truth about him? Literally the worst person out of all of them. The thing about Dazai, though, is that he is probably just as stubborn as Chuuya. They might have only met days ago, but Dazai has been toying with him from the start. Now that he has uncovered something of this magnitude, he certainly won't stop, so backing out of this is all but a fruitless task.

"Fine," he ends up growling and throwing up his hands, "you got me. I'm a twenty-year-old guy who never fucking learned how to read. You happy?"

Dazai's sardonic smile gets even wider. "Oh, I forgot. Happy birthday."

Chuuya's chin jerks up to him. "How do you know that?!"

"I know things, Chuuya. That stimulates *my* brain. You really shouldn't be surprised by this by now."

Crossing his arms over his chest, Chuuya exhales slowly. "So. What will you do with this information?"

"Fix it, obviously," Dazai replies. "I have plans for you, and they don't include you screwing up because you didn't have all the necessary information. Don't worry, though. Learning to write and read is hard but not impossible."

"What you're gonna do? *Teach me?"* he asks mockingly.

"That is exactly what I'm going to do," Dazai tells him and starts heading towards the door. "I'm also going to make sure that you will

receive all information verbally, so you actually know what —”

“Wait.”

“Hm?”

“You can’t go around telling people I can’t fucking read. They already think I’m the street rat who will betray the mafia at any given moment. Do you know what they’ll do when they find out I’m illiterate?!”

Dazai halts with a hand around the doorknob, considering this. “Fine. I won’t tell anyone about your little secret, but I will be taking precautions, and I will teach you. Some things come before pride, Chuuya.”

“Yeah, I married into the mafia,” Chuuya mutters. “I know how to swallow my pride.”

“Good. Then we’re in agreement. Same time tomorrow? Sounds good. Great. Good night.”

After the door falls shut, Chuuya stands there and stares at it for a moment.

It wasn’t as bad as he always imagined it would be: being found out.

Actually, it wasn’t bad at all. Dazai did not mock him, not really. He was more concerned about the logistics of Chuuya’s career here in the mafia.

Still, there is more than enough time for things to worsen.

Especially if his teacher is going to be Dazai.

Chapter End Notes

thank you so much for the kudos and comments!!!! i appreciate and cherish every single one <3

Chapter 4: Terms and Conditions

Chapter Notes

> thank you so much for the kudos and the comments! <3 it really means a lot to me

The next morning, the irritating sound of rapid-fire doorbell ringing jerks Chuuya out of his dreams. He's always been a light sleeper, so he slides out of bed, and slips into a yukata in no time before stumbling through the apartment, yawning and half-tripping over his pair of pants that he left on the floor last night.

He expects another unpleasant visit from Dazai, considering his ominous promise about *helping Chuuya with his little problem,* perhaps Kouyou with another job for him, but who he definitely doesn't expect to see is —

"Guys?" Chuuya says, holding open the door because *Yuan, Shirase, and Luca are standing in front of him.* "What are you —"

"Told you we were at the right door," Yuan tells the other two with a click of her tongue. "I got 'em wrapped around my finger nice and tight." Turning to Chuuya, her face lights up into a mischievous grin. "So that's where you've been hiding all this time!"

"I wasn't *hiding*," Chuuya huffs as his friends push past him and into the apartment, heads whipping this way and that as they take it all in.

Stuffing his hands into the pockets of his jacket — not that damn mafia suit, Shirase lets out a low whistle. "If I had a place like this, I'd be hiding, too."

"Again: *not* hiding."

"Yeah, yeah, I'm just glad we found you," Yuan calls over her shoulders as she inspects the inside of the fridge. "I know you're now mafia royalty and all, but *please,* Chuuya, checking in every once in a while to let us know that you haven't been murdered would be much appreciated."

Chuuya's not sure whether he's grateful or not for Luca when doesn't give him a chance to explain himself.

"So that's your job?" he asks with a humorless smirk. "Living it up like

the prince of Monaco?"

"And if yes, where can I sign up for that?" Yuan takes a sip of orange juice that she must have found. "Because God knows I'm tired of playing errand girl for these boring, emotionless fucks. I deserve a penthouse like this, too."

"First of all," Chuuya shoots Luca a glare, "I *work*. Considering this is the damn mafia we're talking about here, it shouldn't come as a surprise that I do that *at night*, so forgive me for sleeping in. And second," he shrugs, "I don't see why you can't live here. There's more than enough space."

He'll have to figure out a way to find a reasonable explanation for having *literacy lessons,* but that's a problem for another day.

Yuan's brows shoot up. "Oh?"

"Fuck knows, you're probably safer here," Chuuya mutters wryly, "*considering someone here gave up essential mafia information first chance they fucking got."*

Hook. Line. And sinker.

Except that Luca doesn't seem embarrassed or surprised. He simply looks angry. "The port mafia deserves to get disbanded!"

Chuuya massages his temple. "Obviously, but —"

"They offered *immunity!* To *all of us!"*

"And it was a trap as plain as day!" it rips out of Chuuya. "Don't you think I wanted to give up a few names and some information and be done with it? I wish it was that easy, but we have to be fucking patient here if we want to get anything done!"

"That's easy for you to say," Luca snaps, waving his hand around himself, "sitting here at the top of the castle just because you wh—"

"All right," Yuan cuts in — *literally,* shoving a cup of orange juice towards Luca's chest as if that will make him see reason somehow. "How about we calm down a little? Chuuya's right. This is the port mafia we're talking about. We can't just take 'em down in a matter of a few days. These things take time. Organizing. A plan."

"Do we have that?" Shirase asks, leaning against the kitchen island

with his arms crossed. “A plan? Because all I hear is Chuuya saying we have one, but not *what.”*

Chuuya lets out a sigh, shoulders drooping as the magnitude of this looms over him like a dark, incoming tidal wave. There’s no escaping it. “We keep our heads low until we have enough valuable information. We do our jobs. Do what they say. Get on the *inside.* And then…” He shrugs. “We ruin the organization from within.”

He doesn’t mention that yesterday Dazai implied *this exact plan* — and that he didn’t seem to care too much about it either. Frankly, Dazai’s motives are too double-ended and complicated to worry about right now. They will require more than a few simple words to understand.

Shirase scoffs, shaking his head. “Yeah, because that’s so easy.”

Chuuya’s glare snaps to him. “Do you have another idea?” Silence. *No.* “Yeah, didn't think so.”

It’s enough for now. For Shirase and Yuan, at least. Luca’s still silently brooding and glowering daggers at the floor as if it personally offends him. Chuuya has a hunch that he knows the reason behind that scowl — even if it doesn’t make sense to him. Not anymore. He nods at his other two friends. “Could you guys give us a moment?”

Yuan makes a face that says more than a thousand words before she grabs Shirase’s wrist. “C’mon, let’s take a tour and look at the... the bathroom. Bet Chuuya has a crazy bathtub.”

As soon as they’re out of sight, Luca jerks his chin at Chuuya. “*What?*”

“They’ll keep an extra eye on you and the other sheep who, y’know, didn’t pass the test. I just wanted to give you a heads up. Be careful of what you say or do around here.”

Luca nods bitterly. “Right. Did *he* tell you to warn me?”

“What’s your problem?” Chuuya finally snaps. “And I mean your actual problem? Because I’m doing what I can here, and all you’re doing is shit on me as if it was my idea to join the mafia!”

“It was!”

“Shirase needed our help! This was our only option!”

“You *married* that guy, Chuuya! Married him! What else are you doing

for him, huh? Spreading your legs for that stupid, ridiculous plan of yours?! Opening your —"

"*Fuck you."* His fists ache with the need to be used, but — even though Luca's being an ass right now, Chuuya knows that, deep down, he's being worried in an overprotective, brutish kind of way, so instead of punching him, he turns around, stomps to the kitchen island, and starts reorganizing the knives with a bit more vigor than needed. "I did what I had to do, and if you'd just get your head out of your ass for a moment, you'd realize that."

And god knows, Luca is the last person to have the right to complain about what Chuuya does and does not do with his body — even if he is doing none of these things because Dazai's courtesy is a disguise. Chuuya is well aware of that.

"What's that?"

Browse, tugging into a frown, Chuuya turns to look at him. "Hah?"

"This." Luca's in front of him before he can put some distance between them, tugging at his yukata not too gently and revealing a patch of his bare shoulder and —

The ink that's hiding underneath.

"This! You let them give you a fucking tattoo?"

"What, should I have said no?" Chuuya presses out a tight-lipped smile. "Because that would have gone well, right?!"

"God, you're so *blind.* You think you're playing them, but… look at you. Tattooed. *Married."* The word rolls over Luca's tongue like an insult. "Probably serving the mafia boss in bed, too. And you still think we have a chance somehow? You sold us to them, Chuuya. Sold us out like some cheap mafia slaves, and now we have to be their puppets, or else we'll get killed or worse. That's the only thing that you did."

Chuuya doesn't have time to reply because Luca is already gone, rushing off to god knows where and leaving Chuuya in a heavy, riveting silence that wraps around his bones like chains and *squeezes.*

There is a plan.

They can pull it off.

Somehow.

Sure, it won't be easy or comfortable, but Chuuya didn't simply sell out his friends.

Right?

Right?

After a few moments, he hears the footsteps of his friends slowly approach; Yuan's the first to appear, offering him a crooked smile. "Lover's spat?"

"Fuck off," he murmurs and rests his face against his hands on the counter.

They stopped being lovers the moment Chuuya found out that Luca had a girlfriend that he had kept a secret for three months.

"Sorry, couldn't help myself," Yuan's voice apologizes before she bumps shoulders with him. "Don't worry. He'll get over it. You know, how he gets sometimes."

"Whatever. I don't care."

"Sure, you don't."

"I *don't.*"

"So about me moving in here. Were you serious about that?"

Lifting his head, Chuuya smiles weakly. The sheep might hate him for what he did to them by agreeing to the alliance with the mafia, but, hey, at least he's still got Yuan on his side.

***

After his friends leave — Yuan promising to be back soon with a bag of her things — no one else bothers Chuuya for the rest of the day. Not even Kouyou. Whether it's down to the fact that Dazai discovered that he can't read and doesn't believe he's competent enough to do any work anymore, or whether his status as Dazai's weird not-really-husband grants him long weekends, Chuuya isn't sure. He does use the time he has to plot, though.

If Dazai is going to meet him every step of the day, then Chuuya's simply going to have to plan smarter. Sure, right now, he's probably

no match for Dazai, but he has learned a lesson or two while living on the streets and being the leader of the sheep. He'll make do.

One of the things that makes the port mafia so powerful is that they have *some* sort of agreement with the state, or else they wouldn't be able to operate so freely and on such a large scale without any blowback whatsoever. Before Dazai's ascension, Chuuya heard of special tasks forces created specifically for organized crime organizations, cartels, and gangs, but afterwards… it's like the entire city gave up because it knew it'd be a fruitless task. They've only been cornering smaller groups ever since.

The port mafia is untouchable. Even that detective agency that makes an appearance every now and then seems to have made peace with its existence.

A shame really, Chuuya thinks, to let this beast dig its claws so deep into Yokohama.

Be that as it may, if Dazai has secured the mafia ties with the politicians and the military, all the sheep have to do is to cut them. Not an easy task, sure, but not impossible either.

Chuuya does some exploring, too. First in the penthouse, where he finds nothing of value except some dusty books and a few black coats and suits in the back of a closet. Then of the tower. Most of the Mafiosi he encounters still act like he's been touched by the plague, lowering their gazes and refusing to look him in the eye, which doesn't make him feel very welcome but does make his tour pass by without any interruptions. He finds the board rooms where Kouyou took him to that meeting with Ace and the brothers, hoping to see Karma again.

It's people like the young servant that he needs to befriend. Not significant enough to be noticed by anyone, but deep enough in the mafia's nest to know their way around. Plus, Chuuya's pretty sure Karma would love a shot at kicking this place's ass. Everyone in a collar would.

Karma is not there, though. The hallways are eerily deserted. When one of the doors to the rooms does open, it's just a middle-aged man in a plain suit carrying a small suitcase. Pretending to wait for the elevator, Chuuya doesn't get any questioning glances as the man passes him.

Then the elevators doors slide open, though, and —

Yup, that's Dazai standing in front of him, along with another person, long dark hair tied into a chic ponytail, wearing a fitted, charcoal-grey suit.

Chuuya's face flattens.

"Oh, hey, Chuuya," Dazai says brightly, stepping outside, "beautiful day to take a walk indoors, right?"

"Yes, my favorite things are the dark, colorless walls everywhere." The moment he tries to shove past the two of them, Dazai's hang grabs the collar of his leather jacket, though, effortlessly tugging him back like he's a fucking child being reprimanded by his mother. "You can't expect me to stay scooped up in that apartment the entire time," Chuuya mutters and shoots him a glare.

Dazai tilts his head before looking at his silent shadow. "Gin-chan, did I say that Chuuya here wasn't allowed to leave?"

"No," the Gin person says. "You didn't."

"Wonderful. Then it's not just me who must have missed something." Chuuya opens his mouth to argue, but Dazai stops him yet again, shaking his head and tsk-ing. "The next bullet point on my to-do list was you anyway, so," he pushes him forward ever so slightly, then finally lets go, "walk with us." When Chuuya does, albeit with a dubious scowl, Dazai motions to Gin. "By the way, Chuuya, this is Gin. They're my secretary. Gin, this is my lovely husband, Nakahara Chuuya, although you might also know him as the king of the sheep or the guy that's been causing us trouble the last few years."

Gin's nod is small and polite. Their words not so much. "I thought you'd be... taller."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"That you use big words for such a small man," Dazai provides.

"Well, then I'm not surprised you're so tall," Chuuya shoots back, "with that ginormous ego that you have to store in your body. Where are we going anyways? I thought you never leave your office."

"Hmm, the never-ending assassination attempts do make it a nuisance to leave my fortress of solitude," Dazai agrees as they cross the orbicular hall, the sky outside the windows drenched in hues of orange and lilac. "They tried again just a few hours ago."

Chuuya's eyes snap to him. "Really?" Maybe he won't even have to do that much work himself.

"No," Dazai replies, "that was a lie. No one has been brave enough since the last attempt two months ago. I'm getting bored waiting, to be honest. However, back to your question, our destination is this." As if on cue, they come to a halt in front of a plain black door. "The central control surveillance room."

Chuuya watches him fish out his key card, but Dazai physically blocks the room with a silly grin when the door is open. "Gin-chan, why don't you stay here with Chuuya? Get to know each other?"

"Okay," Gin says, even if the mildly pained expression on their face mirrors Chuuya's. "So… how do you like it here?"

Seeing the inside of the surveillance room would have probably been more valuable information. Gin is Dazai's secretary, though; they probably know *all* about this whole place. So Chuuya decides to play along this time.

"I've had better jobs," he jokes and makes a show of glancing around curiously before looking back at Gin. "I gotta say, I expected more blood and violence than, you know, all this business stuff."

"I did too when I first started working here. It's been a quiet few months, but I'm sure you'll get your, uh, blood and violence soon."

Chuuya lets out a nervous chuckle. "That's… reassuring." And then because he sees an opening to pry some information out of them: "When did you join?"

"A little more than a year ago."

"Can I ask why?"

Gin's mouth twitches, and they offer him a distant smile. "Dazai-san offered me a job. I had nothing else. So I said yes." He doesn't expect them to return the question. "Why did you?"

He didn't have a choice.

Except that he did.

It would have been a difficult task, but Chuuya and the sheep could have gotten Shirase out of that prison if they had tried hard enough.

At least, that's what Luca and Shirase seem to think.

But this opportunity to ruin the mafia, to get all the information that it holds...

It was a once-in-a-life-time-chance.

"I wanted to save a friend."

Folding their hands behind their back, Gin's eyes slowly travel around the hallway. "It's not that bad here," they say. "This place isn't a cruise trip, but you get used to it."

The door of the surveillance room opens before Chuuya can respond, and Dazai steps out. He scans both of them for what, Chuuya doesn't know, then he starts walking. "Gin, you're free for tonight. Have fun poking people's butts."

At the frown that appears on his face, Gin explains, "I like to spar in my free time."

"Oh, hey, me too." Ignoring the way Dazai's gaze lands on him, Chuuya offers them an inviting smile. "You have a gym here, right? Maybe I could join you for a session someday."

Gin's spine straightens as they consider this idea. "You have to know that I won't go easy on you just because you're married to Dazai."

Above him, Dazai snorts.

"Oh, yeah?" Chuuya finds a spark of challenge blossoming inside his chest — a feeling that he hasn't felt for some time now and a feeling that he has missed. "Bring it on. I won't go easy on you either."

The elevator doors slide shut.

"This space is too small for all the competitiveness inside," Dazai grumbles. He *grumbles.* The boss of the mafia himself.

"Like you don't turn into a caveman when we spar," Gin retorts easily with something of a grin as Chuuya turns to give Dazai a disbelieving look.

"*You* spar?"

"Your lack of faith in me wounds me," Dazai holds a hand over his chest. "I can feel my brittle heart breaking into two. Right there."

“Like I said,” Chuuya huffs, “I was under the assumption you never leave the top floors, especially to go to the gym.”

Gin steps forward when the elevator comes to a halt, but they pause and offer Chuuya an awkward smile before leaving. “I’d like to take you up on that offer someday.”

“Yeah.” Chuuya would like to give them his number or something like that except that he —

“Yes, yes, I’ll give you each other’s contacts later,” Dazai cuts in, “so you can become gym besties. Don’t worry. Chuuya and I have urgent plans for now, though.”

Gin steps out, disappearing from view behind metallic, stale doors, and Chuuya is once again left alone with Dazai, biting his cheek to stop himself from showing too much excitement over something as simple as a gym and sparring. And the opportunity to get closer to Dazai’s secretary, of course.

“You’re making friends,” Dazai comments. “Good for you.”

Chuuya’s smile evaporates as quickly as it appeared. “I’m just trying to make life worth living in this shithole.”

“Good for you, Chuuya. Good for you.”

The ride to the penthouse is silent. A small part of him is aware that so far, Dazai has been nothing but extremely decent to him, now going even as far as teaching him how to write and read without way less dramatics than Chuuya anticipated, *but.* Hating Dazai and everything he stands for is not only easy, but it’s also a safety precaution to stay afloat in the shark cage that is the mafia. Hating Dazai is the anchor that will keep Chuuya from diving too far without a way back up. It’s necessary.

Inside, Dazai starts unpacking his bag at the same round table in the living room. Before he joins him, Chuuya makes himself a fresh cup of coffee and grabs some granola bars lying around in the fridge.

Dazai’s not holding any dictionaries or exercise books when Chuuya comes back, though. Instead, it’s the files that Kouyou gave him on his first day.

“You’re going to teach me with mafia information?” he asks with a dubious frown as he sits down across from him.

“No, first I’m going to tell you everything that is on here so you can memorize it for now. *Then* I’m going to teach you.”

“Oh. That’s… smart.”

Dazai’s only response is a mocking twitch of the lips before he dives into the subject matter. A lot of what he tells him are things that Chuuya has already heard from Kouyou — she’s to be involved in any decision he makes, several numbers to call when he can’t reach her, legal matters such as carrying weapons outside — but the logistics for overseeing the transport of the black market goods are a handful, and Chuuya finds himself suddenly desperately relieved.

He’s sure he would have come up with *something* before the mission, but it probably would have been half as correct as everything he’s hearing from Dazai right now. There are a few dozen precautions and regulations that he has to pay attention to, five other people he has to stay in contact with during the entire process — one of them being a name that he recognizes: Albatross — and some of the goods they’ll be transporting are pretty fragile. Translation: if he’s not careful enough, he could blow up an entire city block — and Chuuya never wants to do that again.

As for the *teaching* part…

Dazai is surprisingly patient. He starts out by explaining and showing him the different syllabic scripts, even giving him a few tips on how to quickly memorize some of the signs. Then Dazai lets him learn the Hiragana chart.

Does Chuuya’s pride feel wounded as he sits there and learns about the most basic steps of the Japanese language that most children can rattle off in their sleep? Yeah. But does he also recognize that his own attempts at learning the language were laughable now that he has someone who can actually read and write to teach him? Unfortunately.

At least, Dazai’s presence is bothering enough to make Chuuya focus really, really hard so that after a few hours, he has both the Hiragana and the Katakana charts mastered to a T.

“Someone is eager to be a good pupil,” Dazai comments when Chuuya finishes scribbling down the last sign on the paper.

Chuuya’s eyes flicker up, and he lets a muffled huff. “That’s because I want to be as quickly done with this as possible.”

“You do realize that it will still take months? Years, even?”

“I know you think of me as some poor street rat, but I’m not entirely dumb.”

“Chuuya, children get taught to speak over the years in school. Why —”

“I’m not a fucking child, though,” Chuuya snaps. “I’m an adult, so I can learn faster than that.”

“You’re certainly not acting like one.” Dazai leans forward ever so slightly and taps his finger against the surface of the table. “It will take you one year to properly master reading and writing. At best.”

“I can do it in half of that time.”

Dazai raises a brow. “You think so?”

“*Yes.* In fact, I know it.”

It’s clear that Dazai doesn’t believe him. Chuuya doesn’t particularly care because in the end, as long as he manages to learn it, it won’t matter who believed in him or not, but — and it’s a big *but* — he’s never been strong enough to back down from a challenge when he sees one. Right now, the glazed glimmer in Dazai’s eyes is fuel to the flames of petty competitiveness inside Chuuya’s chest.

Chuuya cocks his head. “Wanna bet?”

Dazai’s amusement seems to grow exponentially. “And what could you possibly offer me?”

That is a good question. Chuuya is empty-handed right now. However…

“What do you want?” he asks simply because clearly, there is something that Dazai still needs from him even though the sheep are all but ruined and under his control. They are not dead, though. And that means more than any words could.

Dazai considers the question for several drawn-out moments of thick silence. “The sheep,” he eventually announces. “You’re going to let them go.”

Chuuya stares at him. “What?”

“I don’t care whether your little lambs stay alive, but they leave the mafia, you stay here, everyone is happy.”

“I’m not fucking betting on that,” Chuuya snaps.

“Not that sure of yourself anymore, huh?”

His hands curl into fists on the table, and Chuuya barely avoids letting his ability loose, turning this silly table into a comet and crushing this soulless bastard under it. (Part of him does wonder, though, what would happen if he just killed Dazai right here and right now.) “*When* I win,” he growls out, then, “what will *I* get?”

“I won’t touch the sheep,” Dazai says with a shrug and leans back in the chair, folding his fingers together like confidence incarnated. “*Ever*.”

“*Deal*,” it bursts out of Chuuya before he can even properly think about the chances of *not* winning — probably because there can be no such chances. It’s about his family. Chuuya will make sure they’re safe and by his side, even if that means working himself stupid and beating a decade worth of knowledge into his brains in six months. “You,” he says, “and no one else in the mafia either.”

“I guess that can be arranged.”

“You better.” Chuuya lets out a tired breath, feeling a sharp, merciless headache forming in the back of his head. “Or I’ll snap your fucking neck and eat it alive.”

Dazai makes a face. There is something so morbidly honest about the grossed-out expression twisting on his lips that if Chuuya didn’t loathe him so much, he’d laugh. “Christ, Chuuya. Do you kiss people with a mouth like that?”

“Ha, ha,” Chuuya sneers. “*Fuck you.”*

***

The next day, Kouyou sends for him. Chuuya expects the two soundless young girl in red kimonos to take him to her office that she let him see for exactly one second on his first day, but instead he ends up in the backseat of a car with a driver that is as chatty as his two escorts. Despite the unpleasant ending of his last and only mission so far, Chuuya’s glad to get out, to do something, gain experience. He spends the entire ride drumming his fingers on his thigh, wondering

what exactly his job will be.

He certainly doesn't expect it to be a brothel in Koganecho, one of the city districts you go to when you need something that you won't get lawfully. It's a hotbed for illegal activity so Chuuya's been here a couple of times himself when the sheep were involved in a conflict that couldn't be simply resolved with brute force, but he always stayed away from the mafia affiliated shops.

The car door opens, and for a moment, Chuuya considers staying inside. What's the worst that can happen? He gets *fired?* They try to kill him?

No.

They will use the sheep.

Nails digging into his palm hard enough to draw blood, Chuuya forces himself to move. The building looks subtle from the outside, able to be overlooked if a passerby doesn't know what they're looking for, which speaks for the exclusivity of the club. Instead of taking him to the front entrance, the two girls guide Chuuya through a narrow alley and around, entering through some sort of backdoor. Inside, there's soft, sensual music playing somewhere in the other room, but the corridor they're in looks completely unassuming: a warderobe for jackets and coats, a service cart with a few empty dishes on it, three doors and a staircase.

"Ane-san is waiting for you upstairs," one of the girls says with a gentle push.

Chuuya looks over his shoulder even as he tentatively climbs the stairs, getting encouraging nods from both of them, before he disappears around the corner. There's only one door upstairs and he knocks when he reaches it.

After a moment or two he hears Kouyou call, "come in."

Once again, Chuuya bites into an apple and tastes chicken. The office he enters looks more like a home. It's vast, painted in flamingo-pink and greenish hues, has a lot of greenery in the corners, and a traditional in-built kitchen, and Kouyou herself is waiting for him on a velvet couch, a cup of tea in her hand.

"Sit with me," she says in greeting.

Chuuya does. He lets his fingers run over the soft material before meeting her gaze. Kouyou nods at the other set on the coffee table in front of them.

“Have some tea.”

“It’s not poisoned, is it?” he jokes even as he picks up the tiny cup and the saucer that comes with it, trying to mimic the way Kouyou is holding it.

“We’re going to treat the subject poison later someday.”

Oh. They *will?*

“Like this,” she says then and leans over to correct the position of his fingers around the cup of tea — right hand around the cup, left one supporting it. Her expression when she looks away doesn’t look much happier with him than before. “It’s like teaching a donkey pirouettes.”

Chuuya’s mouth flattens. “This is ridiculous. Why drink tea out of these tiny ass cups when there are perfectly bigger ones that would do the job? And *why* are we drinking tea instead of *working?”*

“Do you know how most businessmen prefer to talk over arrangements?” Kouyou asks him, clearly unimpressed by his little outburst. “Over *tea.* Now I’m sure you can imagine how likely someone is willing to listen to you when you can’t even do something as simple as holding up a teacup.

With a sigh of defeat, Chuuya mirrors Kouyou’s exact positioning of her hands, her posture, and even her expression: calm and collected but also like she high above everyone else.

“Good,” she praises. “Next: how attached are you to clothes?”

Chuuya *still* doesn’t understand what’s wrong with him. They are stylish, and even though he doesn’t like the mafia, they fit into the whole criminal vibe they have. But Kouyou thinks otherwise, so she makes him get up and drags him into a room that’s attached to her office. Every time Chuuya so much as opens his mouth to argue, she gives him this strange, cold look so that he ends up in a room getting dragged into a room full of clothes.

As Kouyou starts pushing dresses and suits aside, searching for something, Chuuya takes a look around. There are some of these vanity tables, too, and more velvet chairs. “Are all these clothes just

for you?"

"They're for my subordinates."

Not just mafia subordinates, but the people working here, too — though, if he's technical, those probably work for the mafia as well.

"Oh." Chuuya makes a little sound in the back of his throat. "Are you going to make me —"

"You're not going to work here," Kouyou answers without even looking at him, though she finally pulls out a white silk shirt from the rack. "I can arrange a few private lessons with one of my girls or boys if you would like, though. Dazai told me not to, but speaking from personal experience, it won't do any harm to know your way around someone's body."

Chuuya presses out an awkward smile while his chest sags in relief. "I think I'm good. Thanks." And with good, he doesn't mean that he is an expert at fucking — he isn't — he just relies on a different kind of body language to make people do what he wants. Mainly: his fists. And he's not planning to change that either.

At least, Kouyou accepts *that* without any objections. It takes her another few minutes of searching before she reemerges from the colorful labyrinth of clothes with several shirts, pants, and even a few accessories elegantly swung around her arm.

Everything Kouyou does comes off elegantly, Chuuya thinks, watching her all but slide to one of the chairs to spread out her findings. Chuuya realizes that… maybe learning a few things from her will actually come in handy. He is used to dealing with life in the quickest and most brutish way — when you grow up on the streets, you don't really have a choice — but he can see the appeal of neat, opulent movements. It's not only aesthetically pleasing but deceptive, and frankly, Chuuya is tired of wearing his emotions on his sleeve.

"Try these on," Kouyou orders.

Chuuya considers the sortiment — it's not that bad, plain but lavish, though he can't help but pick at his leather coat a little sadly. It feels like cutting off an old friend. "All of them?"

"Yes. I need to see them on you to properly judge whether they're work-appropriate or not."

“Fine.”

First is a sapphire-blue shirt that matches the color of his eyes. It’s not *bad*, but it’s too bright and too hard on the eyes, if you ask him. Kouyou must think the same because she shakes her head. They go through several shirts, trousers, and suits, some of them ending up on the pile that Chuuya will get to take home and others end up in the corner that Kouyou doesn’t deem worthy.

The last outfit he tries is the one that Chuuya instantly agrees to.

“This one,” he says and glances down at himself. The mahogany shade of red reminds him of something, makes his brain *itch* with something that he can’t quite place right now, but it also looks good, especially paired with the tight, form-fitting pants hugging his legs. “I want this one.”

Kouyou’s hum sounds oddly sarcastic, making Chuuya puzzled enough to frown but not really brave enough to question the woman about it. (It’s that look of hers. Terrifying.) “You would have gotten either way.”

Chuuya’s scowl deepens as he looks at himself in the mirror. “Well, it is pretty.”

“The boss thinks so, too.”

Chuuya finds himself faltering. The mention of Dazai makes him connect the dots, finally realizing what the color of his shirt reminded him of earlier. It’s the scarf. The shades are exactly the same.

***

The afternoon before the auction is supposed to take place, Dazai comes over again to continue the tattoo on his back. While he’s busy inking Chuuya, he also makes him recite the charts he learned. Considering how busy Chuuya is with his new tasks and how important the bet is, he feels almost grateful for it. He thanks Dazai by not snapping at him for a few hours.

When Dazai is finished, he rolls away on the chair and asks, “do you know everything that you need for tomorrow?”

“Pretty sure I do.” And then because Dazai gives him one of those looks. “*Yes.* I will not cost you millions of yen. Don’t you worry about that.”

“I’m not concerned about the money. I would like my executives to stop thinking of you as an enemy within ranks, though, so that I can finally put you to use.”

There it is again. That mystic talk about Chuuya and whatever weird role Dazai wants him to play while refusing to tell him about it. Chuuya can’t say that he is a fan of it, especially when his own plans differ epically.

“Any rival organization that you need me to defeat or what?” he mutters, only three percent serious.

Dazai, however, is for once. “Mmm, quite a few, actually.”

“Hah?!”

“The mafia as you know it right now,” Dazai theatrically waves his arm all around himself, “is not going to last for much longer. It’s only the calm before the storm.”

“Then shouldn’t you be preparing for a fight?”

“I have been doing just that.” Dazai gets to his feet and lazily stretches his arms over his head, revealing a patch of bare skin on his stomach when the end of his shirt rides up.

Chuuya drags his eyes up to shoot him a scowl that half-melts away because of the sleepy yawn interrupting. “You’re so fucking weird. You know that?”

“I have heard that once or twice, yes.”

Mystifying and enigmatic don’t even begin to describe Dazai and all the riddles hidden in every word he utters.

“*Notwithstanding,*” Dazai says, “be ready at eight in the morning. I’ll send someone to wake you up in case you cannot set an alarm clock.”

“I can read numbers,” Chuuya snaps.

All Dazai does is shoot him a blinding smile and flick his fingers in a mock salute before sauntering out of the room.

Chapter 5: A(u)ction!

Chapter Notes

this one's a big boy!!!

“Choose five.”

Chuuya’s head whips away from the few dozen black-and-white-clad blank-faced Mafiosi waiting for orders and to Kouyou, who is busy tapping away at her iPad a few feet away in the courtyard of the mafia base. “What do you mean choose?” he asks. And then a little quieter: “I thought I was supposed to work with them.”

“That would have been the safest choice, yes, but our boss does not like safe. He likes insane, so choose your subordinates. And take your time. You’ll not only be stuck with but responsible for them.”

Sucking in a deep breath and lifting his chin, Chuuya nods. Okay. It’s more responsibility than he anticipated, but leading people is something he is familiar with. He approaches the group of people and scans their faces. Most of them are his age, but one or three look like they’re already in their forties. A diverse mix of people that are now apparently supposed to listen to him as if he wasn’t their enemy just a few weeks ago. (And technically, still is.)

For a moment, Chuuya considers what qualities he views as important, what sort of traits he appreciates in his friends when they pull off a scheme together. Several moments pass before he speaks.

“Who is scared of heights?” he wants to know. “Be honest, or you might come to regret it.” What sounds like a threat isn’t supposed to be one. He’s actually doing them a favor by giving them a chance to back out.

Five tentative hands raise. Crossing his arms, Chuuya jerks his head towards Kouyou. “Step aside.” After they do, he inspects the rest of them. Seven left, so two more have to go, and right now, he can only rely on a sort of speed interview to pick out the right people.

When Chuuya slides his hands into the pockets of his pants, he half-expects Kouyou or someone else to stop him because what he’s about to do probably borders on breaking a few dozen rules. However, it’s the fastest and most efficient way to find out, so.

Tapping his foot on the pavement once, the pearl-colored concrete pavement around Chuuya shatters, creating a gigantic crater. It's loud and powerful, and Chuuya feels the attention of the other people in the courtyard snap to the scene that is unfolding, but he doesn't bother to check their reactions. His focus is only on his potential future subordinates.

One guy falls down, arms flailing helplessly. Then he starts sobbing.

A girl with short, bleached hair smoothly avoids tripping because of the tremors and helps an older woman dodge her downfall by sheer clumsiness.

The sharp edge of the split almost leaves a boy with a lithe, toned body tumbling into it, but he's not only quick on his feet but skilled with his body too, doing an effortless flip to safety. The girl next to him doesn't show off the same athletic skills; she does seem to have pretty steady feet, though, simply taking a few smart steps to the side.

A young girl avoids any falls, although she pretty much runs off in the other direction and doesn't look back. That's one way to go about this, too.

And the seventh candidate, brown hair with shaved sides —

Is gone.

"Make it stop," someone hisses right next to Chuuya.

Correction: they have managed to sneak off and locate the source of this little earthquake.

The trembling stops and Chuuya turns to them with a smile. "Good job. Your name?"

"Handa."

"With me," Chuuya says before turning to face them again, nodding at the people who were neither clumsy, cowardly, or selfish. "You're with me, too. The rest of you…" He's not sure what will happen to them. He hopes that they will get assigned to someone else and not get disposed of. No matter how useless he finds them right now. In a world that's kinder than this one, they would probably have a life that doesn't require them to look for jobs in the mafia.

Chuuya finds out the names of his new teammates. Miura. Costa.

Shiraki. And Handa.

“That’s four,” Kouyou remarks when she rejoins him, patting her kimono, “and that’s property damage.”

Chuuya grins sheepishly. “I’m sure you guys have someone on dial to fix it?”

With a sigh, Kouyou shakes her head. “If you think four are going to be enough, then I’m not going to force more on you. We —”

“Actually, can I ask for someone specific?”

Kouyou raises her brows. The only reply he gets.

“Remember that boy in our meeting with Ace and the brothers? His name was Karma. Can he be the fifth one?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I told you so,” Kouyou replies, but Chuuya crosses his arms and lifts his chin, imitating that weirdly effective glare she uses to get people to do whatever she wants. Kouyou might be terrifying. However, Chuuya is stubborn. “Because he is Ace’s and I assure you Ace is not about to give away anything of his to anyone. Least of all to a brat like you.”

“But you’re an executive,” Chuuya says.

“So is he.”

“But you’re a better one.”

“Do not try to flatter me, boy.”

“Fine. Dazai doesn’t really like him either. I’m sure that means you have more say than that greasy-haired fucker, right?”

“Language,” Kouyou reminds him. “I have far more important favors to trade in with Dazai than asking him, so you will get some nobody as your subordinate. That boy has been working as a servant his entire life, by the way. He will be useless in the field. A liability.”

His entire life…

Chuuya blows out his breath through his nostrils. “Fine. I need to get something from the apartment before we leave, though.”

“Be quick.” Kouyou nods, albeit with a narrow-eyed expression, clearly not buying the whole I forgot something excuse. She’s right to do so. “Your car is leaving in twenty minutes, and you cannot be late.”

Twenty minutes.

That should be enough, right?

Chuuya never runs unless someone is literally dying, but his pace as he heads straight for the elevator comes close to running. As he waits for the damn doors to open, he’s already dialing a number that Dazai left there yesterday. He doesn’t need to read to know that the 1 stands for the boss of the mafia himself. He just hopes he will actually pick up.

“That’s a surprise,” comes from his phone at the same time as the elevator opens, and a hefty crowd of eight people comes streaming out into every direction imaginable. “Is something wrong?” Chuuya opens his mouth but gets cut off. “Is someone already dead?”

Entering and pushing the second-highest button because Chuuya still has no access to the top floor, he sniffs out a huff. “No, everything’s fine. I wanted to talk to you about something, though.”

He hears Dazai hum. “All right.”

“So, will you let me come up?”

“I have no other choice, do I? Or do you want to do this over the phone?”

“I’d rather talk to you face to face.”

“Understandable. If I had such a handsome husband, I’d want to see him as often as possible, too.”

The line goes dead before Chuuya can say that he’s pretty full of himself for someone who covers up the majority of his body with bandages. Chuuya’s not sure how exactly he’ll get access, considering he’s still here, without a card, but he gets the idea when the elevator doesn’t stop moving even as they reach the thirty-ninth floor.

To his surprise, there is no one waiting for him when the doors glide

open, and Chuuya's forced to find his way to the office by memory alone. Even the guards posted outside seem to be in a good mood today, only glancing at him for a moment before granting him entry to the cave that Dazai's hiding in all the time.

This time, Dazai isn't at his desk but idly putting books into the row of shelves against the wall.

"This is what you're doing while the biggest auction of the year is taking place?" Chuuya asks once he stops in front of him. "Redocarating?"

"I trust that the people working for me are handling things just fine. Speaking of which, shouldn't you be getting your own —" Dazai's gaze slides to the gold-watch around his wist. "— right about now?"

"About that."

Dazai tilts his head. "Any complaints?"

"A demand, actually," Chuuya says.

That finally seems to be interesting enough to get Dazai's attention. He stops with the damn shelving and turns his body to Chuuya, a hooded smile dragging up the corner of his mouth. "A demand? Do tell me what it is, Chuuya darling. I'm dying to hear."

"I want someone specific in my team. His name is Karma. He works for —"

"— Ace," Dazai finishes without even a beat of hesitation. "I know who he is."

Chuuya files away the information that the boss of the mafia remembers someone as small and as low in the ranks as Karma for later before continuing. "I met him on my first day. He'd make a good fit for my team, and I… I only have four members right now anyway."

Several seconds pass; a blank lake of silence between them, that lets Chuuya doubt himself forever coming up here because there is no way Dazai will agree to something like that, especially if he is aware of Chuuya's intentions with the mafia. He is standing here, wasting time and —

"What will I get out of it?"

Chuuya blinks. “You?”

“Yes.” Dazai shrugs innocently. “I can make Karma happen — no pun intended.” Curling his hands into tight balls of fists, Chuuya stifles a snort. He absolutely refuses to laugh at his jokes. “But my favors come with a price.”

“What do you want?”

Dazai considers the question briefly, then spins on his heels and starts walking towards his table. With a puzzled frown, Chuuya follows him. “I have a meeting with some… affiliates next week. Terribly irritating people that suck the soul out of me.” Dazai cranes his neck back to offer him a breezy grin. “If I had one. You will take my place in that meeting.”

“Hah?” Chuuya steps forward to make sure he didn’t hear wrong. “Why in the world would you want that?”

“The right question to ask is why in the world I wouldn’t want that,” Dazai replies, sitting down behind his desk. “Those people bore me. And now that I have a husband, and therefore a co-captain to steer this ship, why bother going there myself? You are now as responsible for this organization as me.”

There are a thousand reasons why Dazai should bother going there himself. For one, Chuuya started here a week ago. He doesn’t lack confidence in things he trusts himself with, but this is bordering on insanity, as Kouyou so accurately put it. There is no way he can accomplish the same thing that Dazai would. Not to mention that no one will respect him, knowing his name or history.

“You’re nuts,” Chuuya snaps, slapping his hands on the desk to shoot Dazai an incredulous stare. “You just want to see me fail, don’t you? That why you’re doing this?”

Dazai shamelessly smirks back at him. “Although the entertainment of seeing you flounder is great, it does not outweigh the risk of losing important partners.”

“Then why…” Teeth coming down to grind together, Chuuya stops himself. There is no use asking Dazai why he is doing this or that, he’ll never fucking open up about any of his motives, and Chuuya should start getting used to that. After all, he will never be 100% honest about his own intentions either. If this is what it takes to get Karma on his team, then Chuuya will simply have to trust that it will work out

somehow. And even if it doesn't? That's not his problem. It's port mafia's. "Fine," he ends up saying, straightening his back. "Okay."

"Great," Dazai chirps, "we have ourselves a deal. What do you prefer we do: spit on it, make a blood pact, or the good old-fashioned seal it with a kiss bargain?"

"Neither," Chuuya mutters, a little grossed out. "Can we just skip to the part where you get Karma so I won't be late and Kouyou doesn't murder me?"

"Karma will join the party later, so go on. Don't stir Kouyou's wrath."

Chuuya would prefer to have Karma here now in case Dazai decides to be a backstabbing bastard and not go through with it, but right now, he has no other choice but to believe that Dazai will honor their deal. "Fine," he huffs and turns around.

"And Chuuya?"

He pauses to look back over his shoulder. "What?"

"I like the new outfit. The color suits you well."

His color.

Dazai's. The one he always wears around his neck.

Chuuya's face flushes with heat as he mutters out a dry, "thanks" before leaving.

***

Dazai could probably send one of his devoted underlings for Karma, but even he is not as sadistic as to let them deal with someone like Ace. Besides, the man would probably delay the entire process by three hours.

Usually, he leaves the scarf on his desk. As lovely as the color complements both his eyes and all the dirt on his hands, it gets suffocatingly hot with the coat and the bandages. However, Ace is a man hungry for power, and the scarf is power incarnated.

On his way out of the office, Dazai's phone starts buzzing — his private one — and as soon as he sees the name on the screen, he already feels like declining the call. The only reason he doesn't is because —

“Albatross. Is something wrong?”

Because Albatross is working with Chuuya today.

“No, boss,” a cheery voice on the other end of the line tells him, “everything’s okay-o. Just want to check in that I’m all set up and have eyes on your boy toy.”

“That’s it? Then I’m hanging up no—”

“Wait, wait, wait.”

Dazai does, albeit silently. The only sound is the electrical hum of the elevator.

“Oh, dang. You really waited! Now I forgot what I even wanted to say.”

Dazai sighs loudly.

“You know, I wouldn’t be so annoying if you ever picked up when I called you the other times.” Dazai regrets the night he ended up giving Albatross his number. It was a moment of weakness. A tragic accident. And Dazai has learned a crucial lesson from that mistake: never give anyone, especially someone this talkative and chipper, his number ever again. “Wanna grab a drink this week?”

The word no is on the tip of his tongue faster than any other thought, but Dazai catches himself before saying it out loud because this? This is an opportunity.

One of the reasons Chuuya is still so reluctant about opening his heart and devotion to the mafia-like Dazai knows he will eventually is because he thinks they — that Dazai hides in his office while he lets his people die for him. And there is nothing Chuuya hates more than cowards that have the blood of their spinelessness on their hands. While all of that is true to an extent — Dazai only bothered leaving this building four times ever since his ascension to the highest floor — it can be changed.

Dazai’s not scared of dying. He’s scared of it happening before all his plans are set into motion. However, death and his plans are crassly intertwined.

“Actually, yes,” he ends up saying. “I’ll come tonight.”

“Woah, woah, woah. I was thinking of something on the low, y’know, like at the base and not out in the open where everyone can shoot you as they please?”

“No one will shoot me. The guests of the auction aren’t barbarians, Albatross.”

“Tell that to the last business partner that tried to assassinate you!”

Dazai snorts. That would have been indeed a close call if he hadn’t seen it coming from miles away. “Then I’ll simply have to make sure there is someone there to protect me.” A soft ding informs him that he’s finally arrived in one of the mafia’s most pretentious and shiny parts: Ace’s lair of jewels, slaves, and money. “Keep Chuuya in the city hall after he’s done with the cargo, will you? I have another job for him.”

Albatross makes an unhappy noise on the other end of the line. “I hear scheming in your voice. This ain’t good.”

“See you later,” Dazai says and hangs up as he steps out of the elevator.

He’s only ever been here when Mori was still head of the mafia and tasked him with keeping an eye on Ace and his laughable inside army. It wasn’t much of a challenge, so Dazai spent most of the time playing video games or riling Ace up until he breathed fire. Today is no different.

He doesn’t bother to knock or wait before entering Ace’s office. Based on how extravagant and full of golden-shining jewelry it’s packed with, one might assume he should, but everyone here knows no amount of money will earn him the respect he so desperately lacks and craves.

Ace, busy counting bills, glances up and falters for a moment before clearing his throat and shooing the servant by his side away with one finger. “Dazai….sama. What brings you here?”

The boy, Karma, bows his head at both of them and tries to leave the room, but Dazai stops him with one hand, blocking his path. “This one does.”

Karma’s eyes grow double their size as he stares up at Dazai, probably remembering all the possible violations that could have led to this very moment.

“Karma?” Ace asks, uncertain. “And what exactly did he do?”

“Exist.” Dazai lowers his hand. “I’m transferring him, so you’ll have to find yourself someone else to make your coffee and wash your hair from now on. Or better yet, learn how to do it yourself. I heard being an adult comes in handy.”

The chair creaks when Ace jumps to his feet. “What is the meaning of this? You can’t just take what’s mine!”

Dazai’s mouth twitches sharply. “Really? What are you gonna do to stop me?” His head tilts in challenge. “Are you going to finally go through with your plans to assassinate me? Just like you wanted to do it with the former boss, hm? For years you waited, Ace, only for some bored teenager to take what was supposed to be yours in a matter of seconds.” Nudging Karma out of the room, Dazai flashes the executive a sardonic smile. “Just like now.”

Ace’s hands are balled into angry fists, but somehow he manages not to lash out. For now.

After they step out, Dazai turns to Karma and taps the collar around his neck. The jewel inside evaporates into crystal-blue lights before the collar cracks into two parts and falls to the floor. “You don’t need this anymore.”

Karma, for his part, looks like he has seen a ghost, his fingers trembling when they lift to touch the place where the collar used to sit. “What — you —” His head snaps up to stare at Dazai. “Ace always said the only way out of that collar was through death!”

“Ace says a lot of things. He likes to hear himself talk.”

After another beat of stunned silence, Karma whispers, “thank you.”

It’s funny. This might be the first time Dazai has ever heard that word directed at him in… years. Maybe even longer. He is not sure whether he likes it.

“Don’t thank me but the person who asked for this.”

Maybe Karma expected that this was his get-out-of-the-mafia card because his face falls again, shoulders drooping. “Where are you sending me next?” It’s a quiet, sad little question that tells more about his history than any background report ever could. And Dazai has read that report: born by a whore in one of the mafia’s brothels. Raised on

the streets. Found and trafficked by the mafia again until he eventually wound up in Ace's collection of human jewels.

"His name is Nakahara Chuuya." Dazai watches his brows furrow in confusion first, then raise weightlessly. "I believe you have met?"

"We have!"

"You'll be working for him now."

And for the first time, some of the weight on Karma's back must lift because he does something quite funny. He lets out a breathless laugh.

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Chuuya gets his own car, away from his new subordinates. Something that doesn't make sense to him since he is supposed to be able to communicate with his team, maybe work out a division, but that's not really possible when they're all somewhere else.

When he arrives at the docks, they're already waiting for him.

Climbing out of the car, Chuuya feels his stomach curl in dread. All around them, people are already busy, dock-workers as far as the eye can see, and not as many black suits as Chuuya imagined there would be in sight. He knows his instructions, has them memorized, thanks to Dazai. The only question is… where the fuck does he even start?

His answer comes in the form of a hand-clapping his shoulder and a blinding grin.

"Albatross," Chuuya remembers from that incident a week ago.

"At your service! You ready to get this show on the road?"

"Totally." Except that all Chuuya can do is stand there and press out an awkward smile. He knows what to do, just not exactly how and, Jesus Christ, he is so going to fail this and —

"Great," Albatross replies, either not noticing or choosing to look past Chuuya's lack of planning of how to go on about this thing. "Let me show you what you're going to work with today."

Chuuya nods at his group of subordinates to follow them as Albatross leads him past several containers to a separate parking lot and —

"Holy shit," Chuuya breathes out.

Six motorcycles. Big. Flashy. And sexy.

“They’re all yours. I, personally, worked on them to make sure they’re going to be in the best shape for today. They’ve already been taken for a test drive, so all you have to do is do the job.”

Chuuya glances at him. “Where will you be?”

“I got the fun part.” Albatross winks. “I’m one of the lucky drivers with the cargo.”

Having, at least, someone who vaguely knows what he’s doing, even if most of his contributions are crude jokes and tales about anecdotes about the people all around them, helps. Chuuya splits his team into different flanks, assigning them each one specific vehicle to shadow on the fifteen-minute ride to the city hall where the auction will be taking place.

He spends a long time musing over which position to take — front, center, back, sides, studying the map, and imagining the obstacles they might face before eventually coming to the conclusion that none of them are right for him.

Not when he can take a position from above.

At the same time as the revelation, someone calls his name, and Chuuya turns around to see a stern-looking man chaperoning Karma to the site.

Obviously, they made that deal, but a part of Chuuya had doubts. It looks like he shouldn’t have, though.

“Hey,” he says when Karma comes to a stop in front of him, out of the shabby clothes he was in when they first met and now wearing a suit and all. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“I’m glad you asked me to be here!” Karma blurts out, his hand reaching up to point at his neck. “The boss even removed my collar!”

Chuuya frowns, not really sure how that measures up to get free from that dirtbag Ace. “Well, don’t make me regret it. You afraid of heights?”

Karma’s eyes travel high above before ending up on Chuuya with a resolute shake of his head. “Not anymore.”

“Better if you tell me now, kid.”

“I, uh, have never actually been anywhere higher than the second floor as far as I remember. The idea of it doesn’t scare me, though!”

Chuuya nods. “Okay. What about weapons? Do you know how to shoot a gun? Or how to wield a knife?” They approach the motorcycles. “How to drive?”

“I learned how to fight on the streets,” Karma tells him. “Driving not so much.”

That’s… a problem.

Then Chuuya spots Albatross chatting with a young woman a few feet away, and his mood lightens. “You’ll have to learn it soon, but today, you’ll get to be someone’s shotgun and their eyes and ears.” The silence next to him makes Chuuya look at Karma. Maybe it’s too much, too overwhelming for someone who spent years only serving someone. It’s not that, though. Karma seems to be taking it all in with… silent awe. To think that a little bit of fresh air, a change of clothes, and some action could do that to someone. “Got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

Good. Karma will be quite useful — not necessarily today, but for Chuuya’s plans later for sure.

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Chuuya’s not exactly certain what it is about doing this that makes him feel so good, so happy, so small, and yet so grand, but when the wind whips past him with twenty-hundred kilometers per hour as his feet carry him from building to building, he doesn’t need a reason. Not really. Whether it’s because there is only one simple goal — make sure the load arrives at the city hall safe and sound, no complicated cat and mouse games, no strategical chess movies — or whether he simply likes being high above everyone else doesn’t matter.

On the ground, the car Albatross is driving, also carrying the most important and precious object for tonight, is taking the lead. They are only a few turns away from their destination, and it’s been suspiciously uncomplicated so far. Chuuya’s no fool, though, so he barely glances around himself, trusting that his feet will always find the top of a building, and instead keeps a careful eye on the traffic down below.

It's not until a few minutes pass that he spots a possible perpetrator. A beluga-blue pickup truck accelerating at a dubiously fast speed. Usually, civilians tend to stay off the roads when they see an array of black cars and several motorcycles surrounding it — illegal activities are hardly a rarity around Yokohama, especially when the mayor is basically in cahoots with the mafia. Those who still dare to participate are, at least, clever enough to keep a low profile.

Not that car, though.

"Miura," Chuuya says into his earpiece, matching his pace to the cars from above. "Suspicious object at six o'clock. Do me a favor and slow down a little."

"On it, sir."

She's the formation's defense line and also the closest to the car so far. If she blocks their path and they become violent, Chuuya will know what to do.

He has a feeling he already knows anyway, but he's not about to attack civilians for being dumb fools. So he waits and…

As soon as Miura falls behind them, simultaneously blocking the car's path, they start crowding her.

Chuuya only shakes his head before changing directions and leaping off the building this time. His trajectory is the car itself.

The tricky part is resolving the fight without damaging the road and blocking the other vehicles transporting things to the city hall, so even though it would be easy to turn the blue car into junk with a touch of his pinky, he'll have to be more delicate.

Then again, there is nothing delicate about the way he crashes through the roof of the truck, knocking out the driver with the landing alone. Immediately, the chaos of flying bullets, angry voices, and the roar of the engine as Chuuya takes over the steering wheel descends on him. Shooting at him is, of course, useless. No one is fast enough to make a grab at him before Chuuya's already making a sharp 90-degree turn, directing the car away from the road and straight down into the water that surrounds the lane.

They crash through the small fence, and the moment they all start to plummet, Chuuya makes himself weigh significantly lighter, floating out of the car before it hits the ocean water.

Squatting down on the part of the fence that's still intact, Chuuya watches them sink. If they're smart enough, they'll manage to get out of the wreck before drowning.

He doesn't stay for long, still having to make sure the rest of the trip goes smoothly.

It does.

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There's still daylight outside when Chuuya successfully finishes the jobs, the city hall bustling with animated energy as people in suits and waistcoats prepare the floors where the auction, both the legal and the underground one, will be taking place. He already cleared his five people to leave. Karma stuck around since he used to room in Ace's basement, and going back there isn't the wisest choice right now. So until Chuuya arranged something for him, the two of them stay together.

"So, what'd you think?" Chuuya asks him as they both walk down a carpeted hallway.

"Way cooler than serving coffee and snacks all day."

Chuuya snorts. "Yeah, figures. So you think you're up for more in the future?"

Karma looks at him, a shadow flitting over his expression. "Nakahara-san, can I ask why? Why you specifically asked for me?"

Hearing it like that, Chuuya feels like he's stuck in a deja-vu. It always comes to that one question, in the end. *Why?* Why did Dazai want to take Chuuya as his husband? Why does he need him? Why…? Except that this time, Chuuya's on the other side of that question mark. *He* is the one using Karma as a pawn for his own games.

Chuuya doesn't like how it makes him feel, not when he's supposed to be better than this. Still, he shakes off his own shadow and shrugs.

"You and me, we're pretty similar. We both grew up on the streets and had to join the mafia without much of a choice. I guess it's easier if you have someone who understands what you're going through. Don't you agree?"

Karma's lashes flutter a few times before the doubt in his expression

visibly clears into something light and colorful, and he gives Chuuya a deep bow. “Thank you so much! I will devote my life to you!”

“Don’t be so loud,” Chuuya hisses, frantically looking around to see if anyone heard them. “I’m not the boss!”

Karma scratches his neck. “Y-yeah, of course, I will devote my life to the boss as well! To both of you!”

That sounds more acceptable, and Chuuya lets out a breath, pinching the bridge of his nose to get his thoughts in order. “Okay. Okay. Let’s just find someone to organize your lodgings.”

Karma nods and follows him like Chuuya actually knows what he’s doing — he doesn’t, not really. Technically, he’s not even sure whether he’s allowed to make Karma promises such as living somewhere else, but he’ll figure something out. Even if it means accepting another one of Dazai’s ridiculous deals.

Thankfully, Chuuya spots the perfect man a few minutes later.

Albatross, who is perched against a bar that is being set up and chatting with the service workers with a broad, sunny grin on his face. Chuuya can’t help but wonder, maybe even be a little jealous, how someone working in the mafia manages to maintain this kind of attitude. So cheerful all the time. As light as a breeze.

The moment Albatross notices the two of them approaching, his smile curves impossibly wider, and he waves them over with a flailing arm, almost knocking over the array of empty glasses on the counters. “Oi, I’m so glad you haven’t left yet, or else I would have had to hunt you down. You know, I’m fast, but it’s still not that easy!”

“Huh? Why would you — nevermind. First, I need a favor.”

“A favor? I’m all ears, brother.”

“Karma needs a place to live,” Chuuya says, placing a palm on the boy’s shoulder. “Preferably as far away from Ace as possible. Do you know anyone I could ask?”

Albatross pff-ts and shakes his head like he just heard someone tell a funny joke. “But that’s not even an actual favor, my man. I was already thinking of ways to hide a body!”

The waitress closest to them, polishing a glass in her hands, doesn’t

even bat an eyelash even though she most definitely heard them. Considering they're in the *underground* area of the auction, not the legal one happening the floors above, she's probably part of the mafia as well.

"That's easy," Albatross continues. "Let me make a few phone calls, and then someone will come to pick up Karma. You —" He shoots Chuuya a narrowed-eyed look that's all jokes and smiles. "— stay here. Boss has another job for you, and I get to have you all to myself until then." Chuuya only raises one brow. "Joking. That was a joke! I'm sure you can leave but seriously, be back for the after-party. Orders from all the way up."

It takes less than twenty minutes for a guy to show up to take care of Karma and leave with him just as fast. Albatross assures Chuuya that he will get a phone so he will be on-call for any future missions. Although there are still a few hours until the after-party, Chuuya decides to stay with Albatross. It's not like he has anything to do at home anyway, and, frankly, the auction looks… interesting. Chuuya both half-dreads, half-looks forward to seeing what kind of objects exactly they were sure to transport so carefully.

Albatross explains that all of the mafia organizations and families from other territories in Japan send their high-ranking representatives to attend the auction — it's, more or less, a "dick-measuring contest", according to him. A way to show off their wealth to the community, make a name for themselves and get their hands on rare goods that they wouldn't get anywhere else. Tonight's most anticipated price and simultaneously the one Chuuya was responsible for is a…

"A horse?!"

"A mare," Albatross says, nodding eagerly. "And she's *magnificent*; rumored to be one of the last remains of a wild breed, a bitch to tame, even harder to find and catch, but worth it a million times because they're supposed to have thunderbolts in their veins. If you manage to get your hands on one, you're pretty much set for life because you will win every race there is."

"If they're so popular, then why is she the last?"

"Well, because us people are greedy. We fucked up their natural habitat, and as I said, domestication only works out one out of ten times. It's like trying to bottle lightning, y'know."

Chuuya makes a face.

“As an avid enjoyer of fast things, I’d love to get my hands on one hand someday,” Albatross says with a dreamy sigh. “I’d treat her right. I doubt I’ll ever be rich enough, tho’.”

“Not even with all the blood money?” Chuuya asks dryly.

Albatross shakes his head. “Nope. She’s *that* valuable. Boss could, but he’s sorta humble for a millionaire.” Then his eyes shoot to Chuuya, wide and excited. “Maybe you —”

“I have, like, fifty yen in my wallet.”

“You’re married now. What happened to *what is mine is yours?* Does true love not exist anymore?”

Chuuya snorts. Their marriage exists because of a lot of things, but *love* is not one of them.

They spend the rest of the afternoon walking around, visiting different stalls stationed over two entire floors of the city hall that are auctioning smaller, less risque items. Chuuya finds himself actually listening to the stories Albatross tells him about the different mafia clans that are here today, not only because it’s valuable knowledge for his secret plans but also oddly entertaining. By the time they’ve made a few rounds, Chuuya’s stomach is growling with hunger, so they sit down in one of the restaurants, each plate of food better than the last one, and all of it free thanks to Alabtross’ charming wits and his connections.

Chuuya has almost forgotten why he is still here until Albatross takes a look at the gold watch around his wrist and startles out of his seat, announcing that he has to be somewhere.

“Wait, what kind of job did you mean earlier?”

“Oh, that! I’m not sure myself, actually. Boss just said to keep you here. I’ll call him, but he’s supposed to be here any minute now anyway. Look at how anxious everyone is! Like little ants, haha!”

He’s not wrong. The people Chuuya has met today have all been diligent in their duties anyway, but they’ve been even more so in the last few minutes, the manager of the restaurant running back and forth — wearing eight-centimeter tall stilettos, mind you, shooing the poor waiters around like cattle, workers desperately cleaning the dish to make it shine.

Chuuya watches Albatross leave, then finds himself a place at the bar to wait, only ordering a glass of coke in case his job involves more driving. His piss-poor tolerance might be a little embarrassing, but at least, Chuuya has enough self-awareness to recognize when not to drink. He's lifting the glass to his mouth when he feels the whole place go still, signaling the arrival of a heavy presence.

It's not hard to guess *who* is responsible for the shift in the air. Chuuya still turns around to check, though, not surprised to see Dazai waltz into the restaurant, wearing an all-black suit that reeks of money and power and his trademark scarf which makes Chuuya briefly glance down at his blouse, painted in the same exact shade of said scarf. They're matching.

Dazai is also heading straight towards him, greeting him with a nod and a, "exceptional work today, Chuuya."

The shocking softness of those words makes Chuuya scowl to cover the surprise on his face as he leans against the bar. "Thanks." His throat feels a little dry all of a sudden, so he swallows before speaking. "So, what are you doing here? I thought it's too dangerous for you to be showing face."

"It's not without risk," Dazai says, settling one elbow on the bar counter, "but I have a capable bodyguard who will make sure I will be safe and sound the entire night."

Chuuya glances around. He can see Mafiosi at the doors, but those are pretty far away — too far away to protect someone as prominent as the boss. "Can't be *that* capable if they're not even here."

"He's standing right in front of me," Dazai informs him with a casual smile.

Chuuya's chin jerks back. "Hah? Me?"

"Don't you always whine about not working enough? Well, here it is, Chuuya. Another job. You can handle making sure I stay alive for a few hours, don't you?"

"Of course, I can," Chuuya replies, rising to the bait before he can stop himself. "That's child's play."

Dazai's laughter is powdery snow on a winter morning, soft and icy. "Don't be too hasty. A lot of people want to see me dead."

Yes, Chuuya can imagine since he is one of them, which makes his job as Dazai's bodyguard ironic in a way…. and it's most likely the reason Dazai made this happen in the first place.

With a click of his tongue, Chuuya mirrors his position against the bar. "They can try, but they won't win against gravity."

"Your ability is certainly powerful." Dazai lifts his fingers and gestures something at the bartender, who gets to work right away. "Just do me a favor and don't touch me."

Chuuya blinks. "Uh, okay?" When he doesn't get another explanation, he nods again, albeit with a puzzled frown. "Yeah, okay."

The rule, the friendly suggestion, shouldn't be that weird considering Dazai's entire body and half of his face are covered in bandages. Chuuya doubts its for *aesthetical* reasons. He just didn't assume they were a visible sign to keep strangers' hands off him either. A request is a request, though, and Chuuya will not go out of his way to break it — not that he had that many reasons to touch Dazai, to begin with.

"Do you want something to drink?" Dazai asks him.

"Not if I'm on duty," Chuuya replies. If this is some sort of test, then it's a low one. Chuuya's really not as stupid as Dazai thinks he is.

Dazai smothers his chuckle with a hand. "So dutiful."

Chuuya chooses to ignore that. No matter his answer, Dazai would probably come up with *something* to snicker about anyway. He can do that by himself.

The bartender slides Dazai's drink over the counter, and Dazai takes his sweet time wrapping his long, nimble fingers around it and raising it to his mouth. Chuuya has to muffle a snort when he notices the umbrella sticking out of it. *Fruity*.

Gesturing Chuuya to follow him, Dazai gets up, leading them into the direction of the main auction hall. "Tell me, Chuuya. Have you ever been to an auction?"

Does he look like someone who has? The streets don't exactly hold a lot of those — or any at all.

"No," Chuuya says, biting down the sarcastic reply on his tongue because, despite the candor of the response, Dazai doesn't actually

sound like he's trying to mock him.

"Do you know what items are being auctioned tonight then?"

"Albatross told me about some. A damn horse…"

"Ah, yes. Lady Noriko. A worthy possession."

Chuuya glances at him from the side. "Are you planning on bidding on her?"

"I bet Albatross would love that," Dazai says, clearly amused. "But no. I have my eyes set on something else."

Before he has the chance to ask him what exactly that is, they enter the crowded ballroom. Tall, vaulted ceilings, massive tiered crystal chandeliers in the color of glitter and gold, and guests wearing tuxedos and gowns greet them. Even though the lights are dimmed, creating an intimate, classy affair, the moment they enter, all eyes seem to fall to them anyway as if there is an invisible spotlight above them —

Above Dazai.

Come to think of it, this must be one of the few times the port mafia boss has ever made an appearance. Chuuya doubts that everyone realizes who exactly he is. Not everyone must have had the privilege of meeting him before, but judging by the way, the air seems to shift around him, growing dense and heavy like his presence simply weighs more than that of ordinary folks, the people, at least, notice that he is clearly important.

Chuuya's shoulders straighten as his immediate fight response kicks in, taking tonight's job to protect Dazai perhaps more seriously than he should. After all, would it not be easier to pretend to be too weak and let the boss die instead of attempting to take him down himself? Luca would scream *yes. Just let him die.* Another smarter voice whispers, *wait.* He's not ready yet. Not ready for anything of that sort. Gods, he doesn't even have a proper plan aside from *take him out from the inside.*

The light brush of Dazai's fingers on his arm yanks him out of his head; Chuuya swallows and follows Dazai as he weaves his way through the crowd, offering charming smiles and polite nods in passing. Their goal is Albatross, who is now wearing an equally fancy suit, and who stares at Dazai, then at Chuuya with huge eyes.

“Boss, I really don’t think this is a good idea just showing up here like that.”

“It’s fine,” Dazai says casually. “I have Chuuya to protect me.”

Albatross rubs his temple, oozing stress hormones. “I mean… I guess…”

“Let’s mingle. I want to make introductions.”

He doesn’t realize what exactly Dazai means with that until an older woman, flanked by two guards, approaches Dazai, initiating a conversation that Chuuya watches but only half-heartedly listens to and a hand on his back quite literally pushes Chuuya into the spotlight and says, “this is my husband Nakahara Chuuya.”

The eyes inside his skull almost bulge. Yes, technically that’s what Chuuya is but that was a technicality for an alliance! Why would Dazai go around introducing him like it actually matters?

“I, uh — hi!” In a moment of despair, Chuuya’s eyes flash to Dazai, waiting for a mocking smirk to show him how stupid he’s acting. Yet all he finds is a gaze that is as steady as a mountain, patient and oddly reassuring.

The woman, Madame Jang, gives him a polite bow, and Chuuya clumsily mirrors it. Her smile is kind but sharp as she scans him. “Will Sir Nakahara be joining the circle?”

“I’m working on it so he can relieve me from all those duties very soon, actually,” Dazai says, his smile open and playful — whatever the hell that means.

Madame Jang’s face twists in chiding exasperation. “Don’t be silly, Dazai. You would be missed.”

Dazai’s visible eye crinkles as he holds a hand to his heart. “You flatter me. Really. However, I’m sure you will find my husband to be just as delightful.”

She doesn’t seem to be that easily impressed but she still politely chooses not to deepen that topic and instead exchanges a few friendly words with Albatross. Dazai, on the other hand, leans closer to Chuuya to explain that the circle is a yearly council meeting between the heads of the mafia all over the world to discuss plans and strategies. He also mentions that Madame Yu is the head of a South

Korean mafia clan and also the one who will most likely take home Lady Noriko tonight.

The world!

And Chuuya's supposed to replace Dazai in those meetings soon?!

Chuuya's chest sags with relief when the speakers over-head announce the start of the auction show, and Dazai leads them to a secluded seating area specifically reserved for them. That means no more introductions, but more specifically: no more sudden heart attacks. There have been enough of those for tonight.

At first, Chuuya tries to stand — easier to do his job this way — but Dazai wordlessly drags him down into his seat, so he has no choice but to relent with a sigh, feeling several conflicting emotions warring inside his ribcage like broken butterflies.

Dazai is just so... so shamelessly, illogically, and incredibly *friendly*. Kind, almost, as he makes sure to explain hierarchies and terms that Chuuya's not familiar with, ever so understanding no matter how many times Chuuya embarrasses himself, and weirdly respectful in front of everyone. Not like Chuuya is a hostage that he obtained by making a move on his chessboard, but like Chuuya is a friend that he decided to bring along to an event like this.

Then again, Chuuya has been playing his role as a bodyguard well too, so can he really blame Dazai for his outstanding performance? And glancing at Dazai from the side, Chuuya comes to the tentative realization that maybe, just maybe, he doesn't need to get close to simply anyone, not when he has the perfect opportunity to get close to the snake disguised as prince charming itself.

For the next few minutes, Chuuya focuses on both the show and glancing around the two of them every few seconds, making sure no one is trying to sneak up on the boss. Occasionally — when Chuuya's face bleeds into a visibly puzzled face — Dazai provides commentary on the items being auctioned: a precious vase, a saber, an ability amplifier, a really, really old bottle of wine.

He finds himself scowling once again when the picture of an *egg* appears on the widescreen on the stage, the host mentioning the words *dragon, old, rumored,* though Chuuya chooses the more convenient option for lore:

"Is that an actual dragon egg?" he whispers.

Dazai's one eye glimmers when he meets his gaze. "It's rumored to be. I heard that it was created with an incredibly rare ability — one of the first ones that came to be — whose kind has completely died out since."

"But," Chuuya's frowning so hard, he's sure he will have wrinkles etched into his face soon, "if dragons existed, surely someone would have discovered that by now?"

"You have too much faith in people. Look at abilities. They have existed for decades, yet non-ability users rarely bring it up because it scares them, forcing most people into organizations like the mafia to exercise them freely. Do you really think something like dragons could exist without another man-made war?"

Well… "If you say it like that," Chuuya mutters and turns back to the stage where the bid caller is almost done selling the egg. "Owning a pet dragon does sound rather cool, though. I can't really blame people for wanting to have one."

Not even a moment after the words leave his mouth, the host says, "181 million", Dazai's hand — the one holding the auction paddle — shoots up. Chuuya's head snaps to his left, but Dazai is content to ignore him. Someone on the other side of the room bids as well. The price climbs once again, yet Dazai's paddle keeps rising up and then —

"Sold for 190 million to 69!" *Dazai.* "Thank you very much."

A mixture of voices murmur and discuss this surprising turn of events. All Dazai does, though, is lazily lean back in his seat and pretend like he didn't just buy a goddamn dragon egg at the drop of a hat.

"Why did you do that?!" Chuuya hisses.

Dazai tilts his head. "Didn't you say it's cool?"

"Uh — yeah, but that doesn't mean you should go ahead and buy it!"

"Consider it a belated wedding gift."

"Dazai, take it back! I don't want it!"

He does — but not like that. Not for so much money. And not from Dazai.

“Relax, Chuuya,” Dazai says, waving his hand. “It is just an egg, and this is an auction. I can’t just give it back.”

Chuuya’s chest is still bubbling with startled irritation, but by now, he has learned that Dazai is as stubborn as a brick wall and so nonchalant about it that it’s ten times more frustrating to argue with him than to argue with literally anyone else, like yelling at peaceful, poofy cloud high above you, uncaring of how many profanities you spit out. Crossing his arms like a petulant child, Chuuya turns away and spends the rest of the show grumbling in silence. He only perks up again when Dazai bids again. This time, for a silver compass. He doesn’t ask any questions about it this time, scared that Dazai might just give it to him again.

Once the crude spotlight on the podium dims, signaling the end of the show, and the people start dispersing, Chuuya lets out a long breath. It’s been a long day, and he spent most of it on his having heart palpitations. Burying himself in his bed right now sounds like a dream. But Dazai seems to have other plans, leading Chuuya not outside and back to the base but in the other direction.

He realizes where when Dazai gives his auction paddle to a strict-looking clerk with a permanent frown who makes him sign a few dozen papers before disappearing in a vault behind him and coming out with —

The egg.

He comes out with the egg.

“Do you want it wrapped?”

Dazai looks at Chuuya.

Chuuya blinks. “Uh, can I hold it first?”

“Sure.”

The clerk hands him the egg, and Chuuya accepts it, careful to be very soft when he touches it even though it’s pretty solid and heavy in his hands, the mahogany-colored shell rippled with scales.

“Holy fuck,” Chuuya breathes, staring at it, “I’m holding a dragon egg.”

Dazai leans down to inspect it from up-close before straightening

again and raising his brows. “So Chuuya isn’t mad anymore?”

“I wasn’t mad,” Chuuya is quick to snap back, still clutching the egg to his chest in case… it might hear his angry voice. “Just confused! People don’t spend so much money on someone unless they want something in return.” Which brings up the eternal question: just what exactly does Dazai Osamu want from him?

Amusement trickles out of every line on Dazai’s smiling face. “You don’t believe that I simply wanted you to have a dragon egg?”

Chuuya only rolls his eyes.

“Fine.” Sighing, Dazai loosens the tie around his neck. “Maybe I did have ulterior motives. Maybe I wanted you to be a little nicer to me.”

“You bought me a dragon egg, so I would be nicer to you? What, you trying to buy yourself into a friendship? Is that it? You’re a bored man on the top of the world and need someone to spend your time with because you’re lonely?” It’s supposed to be sarcasm, even if Chuuya does wonder whether there is a tinge of truth to it. To his surprise, though, Dazai doesn’t rise to the bait. He takes the question seriously — at least, he makes it seem like he does.

“That depends,” Dazai says, taking a step closer. “Is it working?”

“I’m not sure. I expected a lot of outcomes when we agreed to become your allies, but not once did I ever see something like a friendship to be in the cards for us.”

A waiter passes them with a tray of champagne, and Dazai politely stops them from stealing a glass before giving Chuuya a reply. “Then you think too much. Didn’t you have fun tonight? Are you not trying to stifle a smile right now?”

Chuuya feels like the man just ripped off his clothes, leaving him exposed and naked. That treacherous curve tugging at the corner of his mouth falls. And he shoots Dazai a *shut up* look before turning away, watching lights and colors dance over the shadow of bodies in the distance where the after-party is taking off.

Being friends with Dazai? What an odd concept, especially when they are both aware of the blatant falsehood of that fairytale-like suggestion. Dazai isn’t looking for a friend in Chuuya. Not really. And if by some chance he is, then it’s only an afterthought of whatever plans he has in store for him.

Chuuya's not looking for anything but a weak spot in Dazai's impenetrable armor either. But he cannot deny that despite its strangeness, it is an useful concept, too. One that guarantees to grant Chuuya many more opportunities to get his hands on something solid and something *dirty*.

END OF PART I

Chapter 6: Lily of the Valley

Chapter Notes

> Hello, today I bring you... husbands who make me insane and who will hopefully make you insane as well :3
>
> Warning for the mention of gore/torture at the very end of the chapter. Nothing too graphic, but it's definitely mentioned!

PART II: PROPAGATION

“Tell me again. This is a *what?!”*

Chin resting on his folded hands, Chuuya sighs and, for the tenth time this morning, repeats, “It’s a dragon egg.”

Yuan, lying next to him, albeit with a much more dramatic expression, looks between him and Kafka — that’s the name he has settled on. For now. It’s really not that easy naming something. Chuuya feels like a parent. “And you’re fine with having that thing in your bedroom? In your *bed*?”

“Trust me. It took me a few hours to get over it, too, but I mean… it’s just an egg, right? I doubt that it will actually hatch.”

“I doubt that it would sell for a few million yen if it didn’t.”

“No, dragon eggs are supposed to be really valuable. That’s why it was so expensive.”

“Okay, sorry. I didn’t know you suddenly turned into a dragon egg expert,” Yuan quips and holds out her hands in a mock apology as she sits up. “And you’re saying Dazai bought it for you. As a present?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“I don’t want to sound like the others — because I know you have your plans to do something about all of this, but… don’t you think it’s odd? The way the actual boss of the port mafia acts around you? Letting you live in a penthouse, dressing you up, gifting you fucking dragon eggs?”

Chuuya finally tears his gaze away from Kafka and glances at Yuan. “Honestly? From what I’ve seen, it’s not that strange.”

Yuan looks at him like he just told her that he popped the damn egg himself.

So he tries again. “I mean, yeah, he’s pretty smart, and trust me, I’m sure he has ulterior motives with every single that he does, but he also seems… bored to me. With his position. His life. With everything. At the end of the day, a part of him is just like the rest of us, you know, messing around for the fun of it.”

“Chuuya, that man took over the mafia and doubled their income in a matter of few days. He took out that armed organizations from the west — the one that the military battled for *weeks* — in *a few hours*. That’s not the work of some young, normal guy.”

He presses out a tired smile, feeling the lack of sleep settle over his bones like second skin. “Okay, okay. I’m not saying he’s not dangerous because he definitely is, but he seems to insist on getting close to me for some reason. We should use it to our advantage.”

Yuan raises her brows. “Close as in doing the dirty tango?”

“Uh, no. No, not like that. I doubt I could get anything out of him with sex.”

“What, Luca wasn’t good?”

When they were still involved, Chuuya felt terrible for even thinking that. Afterwards, he wrote it off as both of them being inexperienced. Still, now that he had a lot of time thinking about it, he can admit to himself that Luca was shit at it. The whole thing. Kissing, sex, and, most of all, being loyal and honest. “Luca was a mistake that I don’t care to repeat again.”

Yuan’s teasing smirk only fades after another minute or so before she nods and cringes. “You’re right. That boy does not know how to use his tongue.”

Chuuya blinks.

“Oh, right. Sorry, I never told you. It never seemed like the right moment.”

“It wasn’t when we were still —”

“Oh my god, no! I’m an idiot but not a traitorous whore! It was before you two started mooning at each other. Way, way before. A drunk

experiment that *failed."*

It's both disturbing knowledge while at the same time oddly comical. Chuuya decides to put it away, for now, to focus on more important things. "Anyways. No sex with Dazai. No sex with anyone." Yuan makes a face. "I was thinking of a more psychological approach. You know, Dazai really doesn't like the rest of you."

"Well, gee, thanks. Can't say that I would invite the guy for a cup of coffee either."

"I meant that he seems to dislike the sheep as a whole. As a concept. So what if I play right into what he *wants* to happen, which is us fighting among each other?" Chuuya can't help but huff out a bitter laugh before continuing. "Technically, I wouldn't even have to act since it's pretty much what is already happening."

Sighing, Yuan scoots closer to ruffle his head. "They don't hate you, babe. Everything's just… changing, and you know how well they deal with that. And to be fair, it's not like you're around much."

Chuuya is aware of that. At first, he had the excuse of that whole *it's about the symbolism* thing, but now… he's scared. Scared that he won't be able to climb over the wall that his friends have built around them without giving him a key to come in.

"I'll come to visit you guys soon. I swear." The Chuuya a month ago would have refused to believe that the Chuuya now has never even been to his friends' quarters *once.* "They're not treating you like slaves, are they?" It's a question that's barely even audible because it's one of those things that keep Chuuya up at night. What if the entire time he's been sleeping in a bed thrice the size of him and enjoying all the luxuries that Dazai has been giving him, his friends have been worked to the bone? Forced to do… god knows what? Is his so-called plan even worth it then?

Is any of it?

Yuan's bright laugh shatters his thoughts. "God, you're so dramatic. They've been treating us like teenagers."

"Really?"

"Yeah. I have work, like, once every four days and most of the time it's a few hours. I have a roof over my head, and it doesn't smell like piss and mold all the time. Yes, I have to share my space with those

fuckers, but it's not like I'm not used to that."

Chuuya tilts his head. "So, what kind of jobs are you getting?"

"Well, most of the time, I just shadow some boring, old fuckers who think I'm some kind of secretary that's there to bring them coffee and light their damn cigarettes!"

That's… frustrating, yes, but, at least, not as horrible as Chuuya made it out in his head.

"I wish it was more exciting," Yuan tells him with a groan. "What's the point in learning how to get someone with a knife if the mafia's not going to use it to make me into a weapon?!"

"Careful," Chuuya mutters. "Or Luca might start accusing you of sucking up to them, too."

"Don't listen to him. He just doesn't know how to pick his battles."

Chuuya hopes that's true — that *he* knows how to pick them, but acting like the mafia managed to drive a wedge between the sheep and him… it might work and push him closer to Dazai — and that might be the key to everything. The hard part is actually convincing his friend that's it's still an act and not Chuuya being a naive little whore as Luca so kindly put it last time.

Letting go of that particular subject, Chuuya kicks Yuan's leg instead. "Do you really not want to move in?" This apartment is too damn big for him. Too empty.

Yuan offers him an apologetic smile. "As much as I want to… it'd make the others all worked up over nothing again, feeling like they're excluded blablabla, and you just said it yourself. You want Dazai to think we're having problems. Can't have them when we're all living together like a happy family."

Chuuya supposes she has a point, but if they base it on some of the truth anyway, it would make sense to still have Yuan here. She's always been the smartest one.

He opens his mouth to complain about it when the sound of the elevator announcing a visitor echoes through the rooms. Kouyou calls first when she sends someone for him. No one else has the key card except for —

“That’s Dazai,” Chuuya mouths silently, and Yuan stares back at him with equally wide eyes.

“Chuuya,” comes Dazai’s voice from the kitchen. “I picked up an excellent book for — oh.” He stops short when he catches the two of them lying on the bed, the egg between them. “What’s she doing here?”

Yuan’s carefully blank expression immediately shifts into battle armor. “I have a name, you prick.”

Chuuya has to stifle a loud snort, coughing into his hand.

Dazai’s eyes narrow ever so slightly though he mostly just looks lazy and annoyed, unruffled as he leans against the doorframe and crosses his arm. The book disappearing somewhere. “Yuan, right? Well, how about it? You can leave now.”

“This is Chuuya’s place,” Yuan is quick to shoot back, jutting out her chin. “Right?” It’s a silent challenge to make Dazai reveal his true colors. Clever, but not deep enough for someone like him.

Except that Dazai’s eyes immediately find Chuuya before he, like a petulant child, demands, “Tell her to go, Chuuya.”

Chuuya lets out a nervous laugh.

“It’s time for your lessons,” Dazai adds, and oh, that’s *mean*.

“What lessons?” Yuan wants to know.

“Uh, mafia lessons, of course,” Chuuya says with a shrug. “There’s so much to learn, you know? But it’s also really boring, and I don’t want to keep you busy.”

Yuan puffs out a sigh. “Fine… I will go *if* —” Her gaze finds Dazai. “-- you give me a better job.”

Dazai doesn’t even pretend to acknowledge her. Instead, he gazes at Chuuya and waits for him patiently, completely unbothered.

“Stop ignoring me! I want a better job! You’re the boss, so you can make it happen!”

“Yuan would fit into Kouyou’s team,” Chuuya suggests.

Dazai lets out a soft snort. “Kouyou breaks her subordinates before she

remodels them into perfect puppets. That's not a job for a grunt."

"I'm a grunt," Chuuya retorts. "And I'm doing fine."

"You're strong," Dazai says.

The comment makes Chuuya swallow. He knows that he's strong — he *is* — but hearing it from Dazai, and that odd conviction in his tone, like uttering a fact, is strange.

Still.

"Yuan's just as strong," he says.

"And Yuan is here," she pipes in. "I can handle it, and I'll leave you alone. Isn't that what you want?"

Finally, Dazai lets out a sigh, his fingers flicking over Yuan. "I can ask Kouyou to *consider* you. That's all I'm going to give you." Yuan's face breaks out into a triumphant grin. "Now scram."

"Well, have fun with your *lessons* then." Yuan shoots him a look that's a little over-the-top annoyed but considering her personality, it might be just enough to come off as honest to Dazai. "And Chuuya, come visit us every once in a while. Don't forget about, you know, your friends and family who took you in when you were a scrawny, little, naked boy who didn't know what a loaf of bread was." Now she makes herself sound just like Shirase, but…

Dazai's brows twitch when Chuuya casts a glance towards him to see whether he's buying it. It doesn't look like a *I know they're just pretending* kind of frown. As Yuan heads out again, Chuuya sits there, waiting for Dazai to say something, but he waits until the echo of the door falling shut rings through the apartment before pushing away from the threshold and flicking away an invisible speck of dust.

"Why is the egg in your bed?" he asks, walking over to the table they use for studying.

"What's wrong with that?"

"Aren't you afraid of crushing it while you're asleep?"

"It's not like I sleep with it," Chuuya huffs as he takes a seat across from Dazai. "I just want it to be… comfortable."

Dazai's eyes flicker up to him, glimmering with amusement. "It is an

egg. “

“And it’s *my* egg, so why do you have so many opinions about it?”

“All right, all right.” Dazai shoves the book he brought towards Chuuya — clearly an attempt to shut him up. “Look, learning to write will be easier with this book.”

For the next thirty minutes, Dazai explains several new things about writing with the help of the exercise book before he eventually lets Chuuya copy some phrases to practice his writing while he gets up to start rummaging through the kitchen again. Usually, Chuuya would tell him to mind his damn business instead of snooping around, but there’s nothing worth discovering here, so he saves his energy on trying to learn.

Dazai, however, seems to have other plans. “Chuuya darling, do you ever eat?”

The question attached at the end basically makes him forget about the stupid nickname. “Duh?”

“Everything in here is unopened and untouched. Completely virginized.”

Well… Chuuya squints, trying to remember what it was that he ate the last few days. He wasn’t even home yesterday, having grabbed food at the city hall. The day before… he had a snack at the shop near the tower… and today, Yuan brought him a croissant from the bakery.

“I eat,” he finally says.

“Otherwise, you wouldn’t be so obnoxiously fit, I realize that,” Dazai mutters, still trying to find something in the cupboards. “But do you cook?”

“Not really.”

His reply is a muffled grumbling noise before Dazai disappears in the pantry room altogether. Chuuya returns to his textbook, so he doesn’t see him walk out again. He hears him shuffling around and doing things, though, and sue him; he has always been easy to distract, which is why he ends up watching Dazai spread out in the kitchen, turn on the stove and start chopping something.

He’s… cooking?

The action is so odd that Chuuya decides to pretend like it's not happening a few feet away. That only works for so long. Because at some point when the pan on the stove is sizzling, a delicious smell wafting through the rooms, Dazai must get a phone call since he starts talking to someone — and that someone is clearly not Chuuya.

"-- again? Well, find out who and where they're taking her. As soon as you know, we take the highway and use one of the state troopers on our payroll. Yes. Yes, do that. Don't waste too much time."

It sounds like someone disappeared — or rather was kidnapped but despite how stressful something like that should be, Dazai peacefully continues stirring the pot. Chuuya truly does *not* get the guy. If someone from the sheep was taken, half of the city would be leveled by now. Then again, the difference is that the mafia has *thousands* while the sheep have a mere 27 members.

Chuuya tries to return his attention to the exercises at hand, knows that the clock is ticking even though he still has more than five months to master writing and reading, but it's easier said than done when Dazai does absolutely nothing to be discrete about the business he's dealing with during his phone calls — and it's absolutely relevant mafia business: names of subordinates that sound important, locations, numbers. Chuuya is sitting a few feet away, perfectly able to hear everything, yet Dazai doesn't seem to mind one bit.

He is almost glad when he hears the clinking of dishware instead. Sure enough, when he casts a glance in the direction of the kitchen, Dazai is loading whatever he just cooked onto two plates and turning around to —

Chuuya's head snaps back to his books, and he scribbles a few characters on the sheet to, at least, appear like he hasn't been blatantly staring all this time. A few moments later, a plate with chicken, rice, and bok choy gets placed in front of him before he hears Dazai say, "eat."

Chuuya gingerly lifts his eyes and watches Dazai sit down across from him with his own plate, shoving some of the material on the table aside, then grab the chopsticks and dig in. Dazai takes a bite or two and then sighs. "It's not poisoned, Chuuya."

"I didn't think it was," Chuuya says with a shrug. "Just surprised, 's all. I figured you'd have your own chef that cooks for you."

"I used to be a kid that had to fend for himself too."

Right. Dazai has not always been the boss of the mafia. It's strange to think of him and imagine anything other than the current man sitting at the table, though; strange to think of him as a human who needs to eat, drink, and sleep just like everyone else... even despite what he told Yuan earlier. Dazai's humanity has levels.

Chuuya hums in reply before finally picking up a bite and lifting it to his mouth. Truth be told, after years of eating garbage leftovers, impressing him with food is not exactly a challenging task. Still, he chews, and a delightful taste seeps through his mouth, eliciting another happier hum in the back of his throat as he takes another bite.

They eat in silence for a while. Even though it *should* feel strange, it's doesn't feel like it right now, not really. Last night, Chuuya never outright gave Dazai an answer to the question about being *friends*. Then again, he did spend the next few hours after that particular conversation hanging out with him and Albatross at the after-party, and it was… fun. As fun as life comes close to these days. Since then, the air between them seems to have mellowed out somewhat, softened into a relatively casual atmosphere — on the surface level, at least.

It's why Chuuya decides to give the whole *get close to Dazai* thing a serious try. "So," he starts, "what exactly do you do all day?"

Dazai's head tilts. "Me?"

"I mean you as in the boss," Chuuya quickly clarifies. "Not you personally." Even if a part of him does wonder. Does Dazai cook in his free time as well? Where does he live? Does he draw? Does he really have no friends, and that's why he spends so much time being friendly to Chuuya?

What exactly does Dazai Osamu do when no one is looking?

"That's hard to say," is the reply that Chuuya gets after a moment or two. Of course, it would be something vague and — "But the gist of it is that a few dozen sectors of the organization run through me, and at least two of them are always on fire, so a lot of it is about crisis management."

The chopsticks in Chuuya's hand pause in front of his mouth. "Oh." Then he clears his throat and adds, "It's just that you keep saying that I will do this and that, and I don't want to half-ass the tasks I'm given. I want to be good. I want to be *the best."*

Dazai's visible eye beams at him — so much that Chuuya breaks the

eye contact, looking anywhere but that genuine yet mystifying expression.

“That’s fair,” he hears Dazai say several seconds later, “but I could talk your ear off for three entire days, and it still would not be enough time. It’s much easier to show you. So I propose that you simply spend a few days by my side.”

Huh…

It does make sense. A lot, actually.

“You will be my bodyguard for that time,” Dazai continues, “so you can be my shadow wherever I go, and you’ll see that it’s… boring child’s play.”

Chuuya can’t help but snort. “Running the mafia? I fucking doubt it.”

“Well, something tells me you have a knack for it.”

That Chuuya doubts too. He can’t even properly lead the sheep considering half of them hate him right now — Dazai is as aware of that as him. So what exactly about him screams that he’d be better at this?

Finished with his plate, Dazai grabs it and rises to his feet. “Have you ever heard of *Lily of the valley?”*

“What’s that?”

“It’s a flower,” Dazai explains with his back facing him. “Once upon a time, Kouyou gave me two of such flowers to look after. One, in the light. One, in the shaded part of my room. Do you know which one survived and which one didn’t?”

“If you say it like that, I’d guess it wasn’t the one in the light,” Chuuya responds, wearing a slight frown.

“Correct.” Dazai looks at him over his shoulder. His eye almost seems red in the warm afternoon light, and with a beat, Chuuya understands where people got the *red-eyed demon* nickname for him. Even if, right now, Dazai doesn’t look like a demon. He just looks faithless. Hollow. “Unlike most flowers, the *Lily of the valley* blooms in the shade. Darkness is in its nature. The purpose of that whole lesson was to educate me on where I belonged, which was, of course, here. Although tacky, I can’t deny that the message is useful.” He turns

away with a nonchalant shrug. “Some creatures are just better suited for the dark.”

Blinking, Chuuya watches him walk off into the kitchen.

For once, he understands what Dazai was trying to say here. Oh, he understands perfectly, and it pisses him off.

His fingers curled into fists, Chuuya jumps up and follows him. “Really? You’re gonna say *it was tacky* and then do the same fucking that was done to you *to me?*”

Dazai halts with the plate in his hand to stare at him.

“I don’t care if there is some damn flower out there that prefers to bloom in the darkness. Do I look like a flower to you?”

“I mean —”

“Oh, shut the hell up! People aren’t flowers! We have brains. We have *choices.* A goddamn free will. And the only one who can decide where you *bloom* is you!” Chuuya intends to jab his finger into Dazai’s chest but remembering his no-touch rule, he diverts at the last possible moment and stabs it at the empty air instead. “Some creatures are born in the dark — you’re right about that, I agree, but what path they choose afterwards is up to them and no one else.”

The smile that carves itself a place on Dazai’s lips sends Chuuya’s heart slamming wildly against his ribcage. “If that’s so, then why are you here right now? With *me?*”

Chuuya barely suppresses a snarl.

Dazai takes a step forward. “Why are you willingly trying to be good at your job here?”

Because —

Because he has —

“Is it perhaps because you had no other choice?” Dazai asks shamelessly. “Because I didn’t give you one?”

Chuuya’s hands shake silently with the effort it takes not to lunge forward and wipe that self-satisfied expression off his face. “I never claimed *I* made the right choice,” he ends up pressing out. “I’ve done some pretty awful things to protect the people I love, and I would do

it again. The difference is that I stand by those choices instead of saying that it was in my nature."

Dazai's brow raises. "Is there really that much of a difference? Whether you kill someone to protect a friend or because that's what your environment raised you to do, in the end, the person is still dead."

Chuuya clamps his mouth shut.

He's not wrong but —

But there has to be a line somewhere, right?

And until now, Chuuya was sure he hadn't crossed it yet, didn't plan to ever do it either.

"You can wipe that stupid expression off your face," Chuuya finally mutters as he spins around to the sink, turning on the faucet to let the dishes soak. "I still think what you said is bullshit."

"But…?"

"But," Chuuya growls out, all but punching the faucet, "it's more complicated than a simple *the person is still dead.* Pretty sure that's why have a juridical system instead of just punishing people who have done wrong."

He braces himself for another counter-argument, yet it never comes. "That's fair," is what Dazai says instead. "So, are you ready to go?"

Right. Chuuya agreed to be his 'shadow' a few minutes ago. Somehow, he assumed this little spat would have made things awkward, but Dazai doesn't seem bothered at all — he actually looks like he's enjoying himself more than ever, playing around with a fuzzy peach that he stole from the fruit basket on the counter which Chuuya has not touched even once since he moved in.

Perhaps it would have been awkward if they were *friends,* real ones. Since that's not the case, it's easy to brush it off.

"Let me change first." He's wearing a pair of loose, grey sweatpants and a plain white shirt. Although they are super comfortable, they're not work-appropriate, especially if he will spend all his time with Dazai. Kouyou might just slap him if he saw him going out dressed like that, and honestly, Chuuya wouldn't hold it against her.

Standing in front of the closet, Chuuya considers intentionally picking an outfit that does *not* match Dazai's scarf. But that outburst earlier was already close enough to accidentally giving up his true intentions, so he ends up wearing the wine-colored shirt again. If he's candid, it's his favorite one to wear anyway — for purely aesthetical reasons, of course.

Before he leaves, though, he makes sure to swaddle Kafka in a cozy nest of blankets and place him in a sunny spot on the bed. It's probably excessive — it's just an *egg,* he keeps telling himself — but Chuuya's mouth curves into a smile doing it, so.

He feels Dazai's gaze take notice of the outfit like a tangible trail over his body, and he does his damnest to ignore it, even leading the way out of the apartment. The office is only one floor above, so it's a relatively short ride and walk.

Chuuya immediately regrets agreeing to this when the suffocatingly dark walls greet him, and he can't help but scowl. "Don't you have windows?" A modern, expensive building like this — there must be windows and goddamn light, or not?

Falling into his seat, Dazai chuckles. "Do you promise to protect me if someone tries to shoot me through it?"

Chuuya opens his mouth, then considers the reality of that, and closes it again. This cannot be the reason. "This is the tallest building in the city. There is nowhere to shoot from."

Dazai smiles like a proud teacher. The sound of an electric hum distracts Chuuya, though, making him turn around and watch the wall become transparent, offering a magnificent view over Yokohama's skyline.

"There is always the chance of someone flying a helicopter or a plane," he hears Dazai say behind him. "People get creative when they really want something." A lot of people must want him really, really dead then. "I mostly keep it dark because it helps me focus, though."

Clearly, Dazai took heed of Kouyou's flower lesson.

After getting a good look at the city, Chuuya spins back to Dazai and places his hands on his hips. "All right. I'm ready."

"I always check in with Gin first because if something is burning, then they are the first to know."

“So you do that first thing in the morning?”

Dazai shrugs. “Just whenever I need to know what’s up.”

“But when do you wake up?”

“I don’t.”

Chuuya’s head tips to the side. “Hah?”

Averting his gaze, Dazai presses a button on the phone that’s standing on his desk. “I take naps.”

“You don’t… sleep at night?”

“I take naps,” Dazai repeats like *that* explains everything.

“Wha — how do you get anything done like that?!” It’s not like Chuuya’s sleep schedule has always been perfect, but he *did* sleep. Not whatever the hell Dazai is doing.

“Coke.”

Chuuya’s mouth falls closed. “Oh.”

“Gin darling, I need you,” Dazai says into the phone, then hangs up and pillows his chin on his folded hands as he waits. A minute later, Chuuya hears the door open — except it’s not the one they used to enter but another that Chuuya noticed before but assumed to be something else.

Gin’s steps are stock-still as they approach the desk before coming to a halt, carrying a few sheets of paper. Their eyes dart to Chuuya, but Dazai makes a wordless gesture. Then it’s like Chuuya’s not even in the room anymore as they put down several thick files, only mentioning that they’re reports. Dazai shoves them to the side, almost like he is telling Chuuya to look if he wants to, but for now, Chuuya focuses on listening first.

Gin talks about the numbers of the auction being in, several new recruits having been made, an important shipment coming in tonight, and that they will need much more personnel because there’s a new group of armed bandits from the west that have been making smuggling a bother, about a miss Matsuda requesting a personal meeting. They talk about a thousand other things. It’s hard to keep up, to be honest. And last but not least, a warehouse burned down.

It's a lot of information in such a short time, and Chuuya is not surprised to see a foggy look gleam in Dazai's eyes as he sits there and listens with his chin resting against his palm. Chuuya feels like that too, and he listens to this for the first time, not the… thousandth one.

When Gin is done, Dazai stretches out his arms over his head and yawns before falling back in his chair. "Is Albatross at the docks?"

"Yes," Gin says, "he checked in half an hour ago."

"Good. He'll handle those freebooters." His eyes squint then. "And miss Matsuda called you say? I've been stringing her along for too long now. Give her an audience then." He fires off a few other orders before sending Gin away. When they're alone, Dazai casts a glance towards him, and for some reason, his face breaks into a laugh. "You will get used to it in time. I promise."

"Your secretary just listed off a thousand things and — when was the last time you saw them?"

"Two hours ago," Dazai says, raising his brow.

"All that happened in two hours?!"

"Yes, but do you see me having to do anything? No. The trick, Chuuya, is to have competent people working for you so that you don't have to waste time on odds and ends, so what really matters, in the end, is what you do when one of those competent people goes missing or when they're not available. It's like a game, really."

Chuuya doesn't bother telling Dazai that he sounds insane for viewing this entire thing as a game. Not only because it's useless but because clearly, Dazai's nonchalant strategy is *working.* The port mafia is thriving. So Dazai might be a little crooked in the head from doing this for a bit too long, but he also has a unique and pretty damn efficient vision.

"Now, I first deal with matters that cannot wait. Everything else comes after," Dazai continues as he types away on his keyboard. "Right now, we don't have any pressing matters, so let me show you something."

Chuuya tentatively approaches and looks at the computer screen that shows the picture of a tall, bald man clad in a black suit.

"That's Oe Katsuo. One of the men you will be dealing with in that

meeting you will attend for me next week. Casino business." Then Dazai switches to the next tab with another picture and another name. And again. And again.

"What about them?" Chuuya asks.

"Exactly. What about them? Never do business with anyone without knowing what their weakness is. If you know, then you've got the upper hand. You can shamelessly exploit it. It's easy."

Tired of standing around but curiosity peaked, Chuuya takes a seat on the edge of the table. "So, what are their weaknesses?"

Dazai meets his gaze and flashes him a sharp grin. "Oe Katsuo has a sister who's an ability user."

"That's it?" Chuuya huffs with raised brows. Statistically, abilities are still rare, but they're not precisely secrets these days.

"She's also been on the law enforcement's radar for the last few years because she killed a couple of her classmates in an incident three years ago."

Chuuya's brows lower again. "Oh."

"She's been living under a fake identity since then. Katsuo likes to pretend that he's in it for the money only, but I have a theory that he knows exactly that the mafia will always be a little kinder to ability users than the law ever will be."

"So what, when someone steps out of line, you just make a few threats, and that's it?"

"Unlike what many people think, threats are not the most effective ways to get people to do what you want them to do," Dazai says softly with an innocent smile. "You can make them a few wishful promises as well."

Chuuya snorts out a soundless laugh. It makes sense, of course. Fear is one thing, but human greed, desire, and want? Infinite. Though, glancing at Dazai, Chuuya, he can't help but wonder. "What's my weakness?"

Dazai's head tilts as his fingers quietly tap against the surface of his desk. "Your friends." Before Chuuya has the chance to snap out a reply, he adds, "you're loyal to a fault, and although it is your

weakness, it also makes you dangerous. Although it makes you dangerous, it also makes you weak. You're a double-edged sword."

"And why does it make me dangerous?" Chuuya is pretty sure he knows the answer, but he not only wants to hear Dazai say but remind him, too.

"Because touching them will either make you implode," Dazai says and makes a vague hand gesture, "or explode, making everything in your vicinity collateral damage."

Chuuya has never considered the sheep to be a weakness before. Doing that would mean that love and friendship and family, in general, would be a weakness. Although it might be one way to view things in life like that to minimize any and all potential of ever losing anything, it sure as hell is no way of living.

But then again, looking back at his past decisions, it's not hard to see where Dazai is coming from. Threatening to let Shirase rot in jail was all it took to make Chuuya enter an alliance with the same organization that he swore to destroy one day. One member of the sheep. One dear friend. That's it.

Dazai leans forward ever so slightly. He looks like he is enjoying this conversation. "So Chuuya. What's mine?"

"Your weakness?" he asks just to be sure.

A nod.

Well, isn't that the question of all questions? Chuuya wouldn't even be here if he knew what Dazai Osamu's Achilles heel was. He looks at the mafia boss, hair a bit flat on the top with a few stray strands sticking out here and there, one eye bright but kind of tired, skin pale from way too few hours of sunlight. So many damn layers. Maybe his weakness is his body, and that's why he makes sure to cover it up all the time. That would be too easy for someone like him, though. It could be his ability — or maybe he doesn't have one, and that's the crux of the matter. Perhaps he, too, has a family member that he is trying to protect. Or maybe someone entirely else.

Chuuya could spend weeks trying to guess, but in the end, it's like looking at the surface of a bottomless lake and trying to find the ground.

Impossible.

“Let’s skip the part where I guess myself stupid and jump straight to where you tell me,” Chuuya suggests, offering him a coy smile.

“How lazy,” Dazai murmurs. Then he sighs and leans back in his chair, his eye still transfixed on Chuuya’s face for some reason. “How about another deal?”

Maybe Dazai’s weakness is a gambling problem. It would certainly explain all the deals.

“Which one this time?”

“When you figure out the answer to that question, I will tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

“The —” The insistent ring of the phone cuts Dazai’s sentence short before he can finish it.

On the line, it’s Gin again. “Boss, there has been an incident. Shoukichi Saegusa is back. It doesn’t look good…”

“I’ll be there.” With a breath that is heavier than usual, Dazai gets to his feet. “Let’s go.”

“Who is the guy?” Chuuya wants to know, following him out of the office.

“Ever heard of *Bishop’s Staff*?”

“Those religious freaks?”

“Yes, those. They’ve been making quite the ruckus recently, so I sent one of ours to infiltrate them and gather information. It looks like he failed.”

It’s Chuuya’s first time in the infirmary, though the place isn’t nearly as interesting as the person who is lying on one of the beds at the end of it, judging by the crowd of people gathered around it, murmurs and hushed voices mixing into one cocktail of gossip and the distinctive stench of disinfectant spray.

Chuuya’s so focused on those people that he almost misses the two familiar faces standing a few feet away. Almost. But he doesn’t. His eyes meet Luca and Shirase, and theirs meet his — their eyes clearly take in Chuuya and Dazai *together,* even wearing matching outfits, and strutting in here like it’s the most casual thing in the world. They all

see each other, but no one makes the first step.

They stay on their side. Chuuya keeps his pace next to Dazai as they make their way through the crowd that immediately parts, when they recognize the boss, is present. Chuuya swallows, still seeing the flicker of scorn in Luca's expression even though he is not turned towards them anymore.

What are they doing here? Are they injured? Did something happen?

Chuuya is about to turn back to them when he feels the light touch of Dazai's fingers on his back before his eyes fall to the man on the bed, and his blood freezes.

"He was found fifteen minutes ago on our turf," a man with bangs and a lab coat says, probably the doctor. "It looks like he has been tortured for a while before they crucified him, then left him for the dead."

Gulping down a knot of bile in his throat, Chuuya looks to his side. Dazai is wearing an unreadable expression as he steps forward and places the tip of his index finger to the man's arm, dirty with blood and sweat and who knows what else. "Shoukichi-kun?" he asks softly.

Swollen eyes flutter open ever so slightly. He shakes his head. "Boss…. I didn't… I didn't tell 'em… anything…" His face twists then. "It hurts… everything hurts…"

Dazai's mouth curves into a small smile. "You did a good job, Shoukichi-kun." Then he gives the doctor a look, a wordless signal.

"Boss." That's Kouyou. Chuuya didn't even notice that she's here. "At least, find out what he knows first."

"End it," Dazai says like he did not hear a single word.

With a quiet nod, the doctor injects something into the drip that's connected to Shoukichi. It takes a few moments, but eventually, his ragged breathing evens out until his chest lifts one last time and then never again.

Chuuya has seen people die before, though usually with a bit more mercy. And this guy looks young. Too young to go through something as awful as this. Every breath inside his lungs squeezes tightly around his heart. Chuuya finally turns around, hoping to find his friends, but they're already gone.

Chapter 7: Southern Rhône

Chapter Notes

Warnings:
- recreational drug use at the beginning of the chapter
- there is very, very clear bigotry in this chapter but it's against ability users so I'm not sure whether that needs a warning but I'm just going to include it to be safe in case anyone is icky about that (present throughout several parts of the chapter!)

It's been a while since Chuuya found himself *this* bewildered by a situation. Months. Years. A lifetime. Not even that.

Because none of his past experiences compare to the sight of the mafia boss peacefully stretched out on the couch with an iPad on his chest and *dozing.*

They were doing their thing, Dazai being lazy and chatty as he went on about his typical workday and Chuuya his shadow, then Dazai sat down because he apparently focuses so much better when he's comfortable. Considering the man wasn't doing anything exciting or worth watching, Chuuya used the time to do more of his writing exercises. However, when he looked up after a while, he discovered that Dazai had fallen asleep, and now here he is.

It could be a trap. Chuuya wouldn't put it past him to either prank or test him by pretending to sleep, which is why he takes a few steps closer to take a good look. Dazai's breathing is even, *too even* to fake something like that. His expression is relaxed. He looks younger but also more human, more real.

Chuuya snaps his fingers right in front of his face. Nothing happens.

Straightening his spine, Chuuya places his hands on his hips as he considers what to do.

Technically, nothing. God knows Dazai needs that rest since naps are the only sleep he gets.

But it's also an opportunity. Sure, it would be easy to kill Dazai when he's asleep, but as Chuuya told himself and his friends many times already: cutting off the head of this snake will not be enough. So even if Chuuya won't touch Dazai while he's passed out, he can use the

time to snoop around and finally set their plans in motion.

Because one can never be too sure with a little person like Dazai, Chuuya stares extra hard, hoping his instincts are sharpened enough to spot a liar from a genuinely unconscious man. He doesn't find any signs of treachery, only a pale, unnervingly handsome face, clearly asleep.

It takes Chuuya a few seconds longer than it should to quietly step away and tiptoe through the office. He's not sure *where* to even begin in a room this big and vast, yet so hollow of anything substantial.

Now, where would a man like Dazai keep his secrets? The desk seems too obvious of a choice —

Then again. What if he's hiding things in plain sight?

The desk it is.

Shooting glances at the couch now and then, Chuuya approaches it. As silently as he can manage, he opens the drawers. Every single one of them. Files, papers, notebooks — all of it *useless* because he can't decipher them yet. Fuck. *What is he even trying to find like this, huh? Photographic evidence?* Chuuya takes a hopeful peek inside the next drawer and —

He instantlyshut its again. Nothing suspicious. Just a pack of condoms and lube. It throws him off course for a few moments, thoughts swirling around in his head like annoying bugs. Why does Dazai keep that shit *here?* Well, okay, he does spend most of his time here too but —

Chuuya eyes the desk. Dazai doesn't fuck people here, does he?

(The lube makes his line of reasoning wander astray as well. Does that mean Dazai fucks men, or is he just one of the more considerate people that use lube with every partner they have? Sure, yeah, they're *husbands,* but in the grand scheme of things, the nature of an arranged marriage reveals nothing about someone's sexuality. Dazai could be straight. Or not. And —

It really doesn't matter.)

The rest of the drawers don't have much to offer either, so he scans the surface. Although he wouldn't say it's pristine and neat, it's not messy either. It's just kind of empty. The only colorful thing is a red-

and-white box of matches with a name on it that he thinks says… *Bar Lupin.* Feeling desperate and like he's running out of time, he grabs the box of candles. He hopes that they will smell good enough to overshadow his total failure of an inside job except…

Inside, he finds an entire batch of USB flash drives instead of candles — although the scent of the ones that used to be kept there lingers. It smells like vanilla.

Now that is interesting.

He can't steal all of them. Too obvious. But taking one and then returning it as soon as possible will do the trick. Chuuya picks a random one and pockets it when he hears a small, muffled noise from the couch.

A whimper.

Apathetic, broken whimper.

Throat working to swallow down a lump in there, Chuuya makes his way to the couch, half-afraid that he'll find Dazai awake, half-afraid that he will find something else. Dazai's still asleep but his face doesn't look as relaxed anymore, definitely not as peaceful when it's twisted into something anxious, terrified even, twitching every now and then. Chuuya himself might not dream but he has seen this expression on his friends late at night when they tried to sleep and got haunted by memories instead.

Nightmares.

Chuuya's leg kicks the couch before he can really think about it. Dazai's eyes fly open. For a drawn-out moment, the two of them simply stare at each other.

"You were, uh…" Chuuya starts. Then he reconsiders his words and lets his brows tug into a familiar scowl. "You can sleep later. I gotta ask you something."

Lashes fluttering, Dazai yawns and stretches out his arms like a lazy cat before slowly sitting up. "What is it?"

"I want to go visit my friends."

"I'm still waiting for the question." Dazai reaches under the coffee table that's standing next to the couch, fumbles around for a bit until

he pulls out a small ziplock bag with white powder in it.

Chuuya's too immersed in watching him crush the coke with a bank card before he registers Dazai's comment. He clears his throat. "I just want to make sure I won't have to listen to you whine about symbolism and meanings for the next few days if I do."

"Do whatever you want, Chuuya," Dazai says. It doesn't sound like a lie or a challenge. Like in most cases, Dazai seems startlingly honest about it. "And that still wasn't a question."

"Fine." Chuuya huffs softly. For some reason, this stupid back-and-forth makes him want to smile. "Then I guess I just wanted to yell at you. And… let you know where I'm going. So you know I didn't run away."

"That's very considerate of you, Chu~uya." Dazai leans down then, long fingers holding a rolled yellow-ish 10,000 yen note as he snorts the neat and long line of coke in one go. His nostrils flare after he's done, sniffing loudly a few times, before he offers Chuuya a crooked grin, tilting his head. "Need a chemical bost before you make the trip?"

Although Chuuya is undoubtedly no stranger to drugs, he's never tried cocaine before, only its cheap, dirty sibling speed, which wasn't very impressive. All it ever gave him was the urgent need to chew on something and a racing heart. But he didn't feel high. He just felt oddly clear in his head. Nothing special.

So coke doesn't look very appealing to him either.

"I'm good," Chuuya mutters. "I'll see you later."

His only reply is a content hum.

This casual familiarity between the two of them *is* strange, Chuuya realizes that in the back of his head, but the odd thing is that it doesn't *feel* weird. Not really. He has been shadowing Dazai for the last few days now, listening to him grumble about too much paperwork, verbally spar with every single person that enters his office and give Chuuya his writing and reading lessons in-between. And all this time, Dazai has been a bit annoying, sure, an occasional smart-ass, yes, but other than that bearable company. (*Interesting, funny company* is what Chuuya does not let himself think.)

Considering this development comes with its benefit, it's not worth

mulling his head over for longer than necessary.

According to Yuan, the sheep are lodged on the twelfth floor, an entire story with single rooms and bigger apartments. His fingers keep fidgeting with the collar of his wine-red shirt when he reaches the door of apartment number *20.12,* suddenly wishing he would have bothered to change his outfit before coming here. Too little too late, though, This is the least of his problems with his friends anyway.

He hears muffled voices from inside even before he knocks. They only hush after the door opens and the people inside see him.

Chuuya doesn't wait for the person in front of him, Shougo, to say something before he steps inside and closes the door behind him. Whatever little party was happening here clearly has come to a stop, everybody's head turned towards him, the silence so loud you could hear a pinfall.

"Why is everybody so — Chuuya, hey!" That's Yuan, sticking her head inside from the other room, short pink hair falling over her shoulders. Her smile quickly bleeds into a wince, though, when nobody else says anything.

"What do you want?" Luca finally asks, sitting on the window sill with a grim expression.

Of course, the question is directed at none other than Chuuya. He could snap back and tell him that he still belongs to them, still theirs, and that he doesn't need a reason to be here and that he certainly doesn't need to hear his attitude, but it's been a while since he last saw all of them — or most of them anyway since some of his people aren't here — and he doesn't want to waste this visit with fighting. So Chuuya pulls out the USB stick and looks at their most computer-savvy member that is sitting on the lower bunk bed. "I need Misao."

At the mention of her name, she raises one unimpressed eyebrow before patting the seat next to her. "Well, come on in then, stranger. What do you have?"

"I was hoping you could tell me that," Chuuya says, handing over the flash drive. "There are more of them where I got 'em from, but I figured it'd be less suspicious to only borrow one for now."

Misao mns hims as she sticks the stolen good into the laptop on her lap.

“I want to see too,” Yuan exclaims, throwing herself next to him and peeking over at Misao working. Her gaze travels to Chuuya only a few seconds later, though, and she bumps shoulders with him. “Got my first mission under that Kouyou woman tomorrow.”

Chuuya blinks. “Really?”

“What, you had doubts?”

“Well,” he scratches the back of his neck, “Kouyou is Kouyou.”

Yuan rolls her eyes. “And Yuan is Yuan. Will you be there, too? You are working for her, right?”

“Not tomorrow as far as I’m aware.”

“What are you doing then? Aside from stealing flash drives?”

“Uh, I’m…” Chuuya’s pretty thankful when Shiro, one of their youngest, sits down on the edge of the bed with big, wide eyes. “Hey, kiddo. What’s up?”

“Do you know what happened to that man? Was he really crucified?”

The more his friends talk to him, the more relaxed the others seem to get, quickly forgetting about that punishing silence just a few moments ago and crowding around the bed to get all the gossip. All aside from Luca, of course.

“Shirase said it was really gross!”

“I heard that the Jesus freaks did it. Is that true?”

“Do you know anything about it?”

Scratching the side of his temple, Chuuya sighs. “The only thing I know is that he was an inside man in the Bishop’s Staff.”

Well, that and he was also sitting next to Dazai when he replayed the man’s last recorded message that he sent the mafia before he was killed, which depicted some pretty valuable and yet gruesome information about the religious group. Something that’s not only highly classified and cannot get out as of yet but also that is entirely useless to the sheep.

“I told you guys,” Luca suddenly says after he seems to have changed his mind about joining the conversation and, therefore Chuuya. “It

was done by the anti-ability organization. They've been cleansing the streets for years now..."

There are a lot of parties and groups that are hesitant about anything ability-related or that demand better ability regulations and even public, visible identifaction, but from what Chuuya heard in those recordings, the Bishop's Staff are pretty damn radical about it. They want the complete and utter eradication of abilities, claiming that they're unnatural and the 'lord's way of testing his believers to see whether they will succumb to the temptation of the evil or stay on the righteous path.

"... and it looks like they're finally getting around to deal with the port mafia."

Chuuya's eyes snap up to Luca and the smug smirk on his face. "Finally? They crucify people."

"The methods are harsh, sure," Luca shrugs. "But can you blame them when it's ability users that they're dealing with?"

"Luca," Yuan says lowly.

"What? I know you're all thinking the same thing. I'm just the only one brave enough to voice it."

"I don't know," Shougo mumbles. "They've always sorta freaked me out. Have you ever talked to one of them? They're so damn insistent!"

"They're brain-washed freaks," Yuan mutters. "There's nothing good about that."

"How are *they* the ones that are brain-washed?" Luca scoffs.

Chuuya feels Yuan tense next to him. "Are you saying we're brain-waished?"

"Look around you. Port mafia is full of ability users. Why is that?"

Having heard enough, Chuuya lets out a quiet, bitter laugh. "Maybe because people like those religious freaks constantly villainize them even when they've done nothing wrong?"

"Nothing wrong? You seriously saying the port mafia has done nothing wrong?"

"No," Chuuya snaps. "That's not what I'm fucking saying. I'm talking

about all the ability users, not the ones who work here. Of course, there are some bad apples. There always are! But that doesn't mean that you can just throw *all* of them into one pot."

"I think the crime statistics all over the world beg to differ…"

"Um, guys," Misao says.

"Who do you think makes those statistics?" Chuuya asks.

"So what, the law enforcement now is lying to its people?"

"You think they wouldn't?"

"GUYS," Misao snaps.

Chuuya's mouth falls shut, and he finally tears his eyes away from Luca and to the girl next to him. "Did you find anything?"

"That depends. Does this mean anything to you?"

Her laptop screen shows… numbers and letters. Whether it's the fact that Chuuya's reading skills are still in their early stages of development or whether it's because there truly is no meaning to this, he doesn't know. "...no?"

Yuan's head almost bumps into his as she leans over his lap to look at the screen, her brows furrowing. "I'm pretty sure those are coordinates."

"Coordinates," Chuuya repeats. "You sure?"

"Yeah, look." She lets her finger hover over specific letters. "0 degrees, 41 minutes, 21.4 seconds north and 74 degrees, 2 minutes, 40.2 seconds west."

At the same time, Misao opens another tab and copy-pastes the coordinates into what Chuuya assumes to be google. It only takes a few seconds before the results show them…

"The golden palace hotel," Misao says with a small frown.

"Isn't that owned by the mafia anyway?" Yuan asks before shooting Chuuya a look. "This is kinda lame, not gonna lie."

Chuuya rolls his eyes. "Well, how am I supposed to know what's going to be on the USB stick before opening it?"

“I know. I know. So what are we going to do with it?”

“I’ll return the flash drive,” Chuuya says. “And maybe borrow another one.”

“Don’t you think we should at least check it out?”

“I guess.”

“So, are you free right now?”

Chuuya is still supposed to be Dazai’s shadow, pretty sure that he shouldn’t spend his entire day out in the city looking for clues of something they have no idea what it is, but then again, it’s not that weird to spend more than a few hours with his friends, right? Dazai will be busy napping or working either way, so what the hell.

“Let me change into something less conspicuous first,” Chuuya says as he slides off the bed. The moment he does, though, Shiro tugs at his sleeve.

“Can I come with you? I’m so bored all the time.”

“You don’t have anything to do?” Chuuya asks.

“No! I only get assigned, like, one job a week, and they’re always so boring!”

A few other of his friends seem to agree.

“Who knew the mafia would be such a snooze fest?”

“We still get paid plenty, though, so I can’t complain.”

“Who cares about the money? I miss stealing booze and robbing jewelry stores!”

Drowning out all of the wildly differing opinions, Chuuya glances down at Shiro, trying to mend his words to let him down gently. Thankfully, Yuan beats him to do it.

“I’m sorry, kiddo, but it’s too obvious if the three of us go. We have to be really, really careful.”

“But you’re going! And you have pink hair!”

“Well,” Chuuya says, “that’s why we’re going to get changed first. I’m

giving her a wig!”

Shiro blinks up at him. “You have wigs?”

Chuuya hopes his nod is convincing.

“So Yuan gets to go with you *and* visit your flat, too?!”

“You can visit me too —”

“Come on,” Yuan wraps her hand around Chuuya and drags him to the door. “We gotta go.”

“Can we all visit you?” Shiro still asks.

How is he supposed to say no to that? “Of course, you can!”

“Can we —”

They’re out of the door before Shiro can finish the question. Yuan lets out a long, dramatic sigh. “You really have to start saying no to them. Boundaries, you know.”

Chuuya rubs his temple. “I don’t mind if they visit. I have enough space and love for everyone.”

Except maybe Luca who —

Even thinking of what he said — god, what he *implied* with Chuuya, an ability user, in the same room, makes a fresh swell of rage rise in him.

“I love them too but have you met us?” Yuan elbows him hard. “They’re going to think you gave them permission to throw a party there, and then they’re going to trash the entire place. Don’t let them do that. It’s such a beautiful penthouse, and I haven’t even tried out that crazy bathtub yet.”

“I can’t believe you’re the one gatekeeping the penthouse from our friends, and still, I’m the one who always gets shit,” Chuuya mutters as they step into the elevator.

Yuan offers him a blinding grin and frames her face. “You don’t have to tell me how awesome I am. I already know.”

Contrary to what Chuuya claimed, he does not actually have any wigs in his apartment — at least, not that he knows of. He looks through

the closet but only sees what he already found before: some suits, dusty books, hangers. Wig or no, he still changes into a tight pair of black pants and a leather jacket, hoping that he will pass off as a simple civilian while he puts his hair into a bun and throws a matching black cap over it.

“How do I look?”

“Like someone from *Matrix,*” Yuan replies, shaking her head as she herself tries to find something. “It’s so not fair. Why do you get free clothes while I only get that boring, plain suit?”

“I only got them because of Kouyou.” Well, that and apparently Dazai wanted them to… match. But Chuuya conveniently lets that fact slide for now. “She’ll take care of you, too. Speaking of, are you sure you want in on that?”

“Of course, I’m sure. You know, you’re not the only one who should do all the work.”

Chuuya frowns. “Huh?”

“Get on the inside, find dirt, and basically sell your soul for the sheep, I mean.” Yuan shoots him a look. “You always say we’re family, so why don’t you ever let us help you?”

“It’s not that easy,” he mutters as he makes sure the dragon egg is warm and safe inside its nest of blankets. “This is dangerous territory. You could get hurt.”

“So could you.”

“But I’m —”

“You’re what? The invincible gravity manipulator? Well, guess what, Chuuya. Luca was right about one thing, and it’s hat everyone here has abilities as well. You could get hurt, too.”

“But *I* got us into this mess,” he says. Isn’t it only fair that he should be the one to get them out of it as well?

“You didn’t tell Shirase to break into that man’s home and get arrested.”

No, he didn’t. But was that really the turning point? Or was it just an excuse for the mafia, for Dazai, to finally swoop in and get him?

Because isn't that why they're here? Because of Chuuya?

He's not sure whether telling Yuan this would make her laugh or curse him out, so for now, he doesn't mention it. "I just need you to understand what you're getting into," he finally says. "Kouyou's two main domains are the brothels and the interrogation unit." Neither of them is very *easy*.

Yuan only gives him a small, unimpressed stare over her shoulder. "I know. You done yet?"

Chuuya rolls his eyes but nods. Not like she gives him much of a choice.

In the end, Yuan settles on a beige coat and a black cap to hide her hair. Both of them put on sunglasses as well. Then they're off. Using the elevator and the lobby would be too careless, so Chuuya scoops his friend up in his arms, and they basically jump down -- although with *for the tainted sorrow*, it's like a gentle, natural lift down.

"Man," Yuan sighs dreamily. "I missed this."

Chuuya grins. "Me too."

The hotel is a bit too far away to walk, so they get themselves a cab, and Yuan ends up paying. Chuuya would offer to do it himself, but somehow he's never discussed his salary with Dazai before or whether he even has one. He's sure he does… considering all of Dazai's plans for him, he simply hasn't seen it yet. And frankly, he's a bit afraid to do it too. He's not really interested in the mafia's blood money.

When they step out of the car, Chuuya's head immediately takes in the towering, beautiful building in front of them. Not taller than the mafia base itself, but still impressive. Chuuya's almost sure the clerk at the entrance won't let them inside, not when Chuuya looks like a damn tourist, but somehow, he does, holding the door open for them with a polite smile.

"Okay," Chuuya murmurs. "Look for anything suspicious. Any mafia members. Or maybe some politicians we could blackmail."

"Do you think I know what a politician looks like?"

"Fuck, you're right. They all kinda look the same."

"Let me google —"

“Oh my god, get down!”

Looking around furiously, Yuan hisses, “get down *where?!”*

Chuuya ignores her as he pulls both of them behind a huge, shiny pillar in the lobby and prays to the gods above it’s enough to hide them.

“Why are we hiding?” Yuan whispers.

“Because I saw Albatross,” Chuuya whispers back.

“You saw a bird?!”

“No, he’s a —”

The moment a big, strange hand lands on Chuuya’s back, he shuts up. Despite the way the touch is feather-light, soft almost, his blood runs cold. Even the immediate reaction to search *for the tainted sorrow* deep in his bones feels muddled by that paralyzing fear.

“Hello, Chuuya darling.” Except… this voice does not belong to a stranger at all. *No*. “Fancy seeing you here.”

Dazai.

Although all signs point to them being in grave, grave danger, Chuuya still feels his muscles go lax with relief as he turns around. “What are you doing here?” he asks as soon as he gets a good look at Dazai. “Weren’t you back at the base just an hour ago?”

Dazai’s appearance at the auction was a novelty. And now he’s outside again?

Dazai lets his eyes take in Yuan for exactly one second before he zeros in on Chuuya only, offering him an enigmatic smile and a shrug. “Well, I was, but then I got requested for a meeting here. What an odd coincidence, don’t you think?”

“Very odd,” Chuuya agrees, trying to keep his expression neutral even though — even though Dazai surely knows what Chuuya is trying to find here, right? This isn’t a coincidence. This is being caught in a mousetrap, except the owner of the house is patient and in the mood to play games.

“I have a feeling the person is not going to show up, though,” Dazai says. “Care to join me for dinner?”

“Um…” Chuuya glances at Yuan, who seems to be holding onto the last shreds of her patience to keep silent as she stands there, biting her cheek. “Sure.”

“Wonderful,” Dazai replies and then jerks his head away from the pillar. “And do stop hiding here, will you?”

Thankfully, he takes the lead, which gives Chuuya and Yuan a few moments of privacy and the opportunity to talk — or, well, whisper-shout at each other:

“Why did you agree?!”

“You don’t know Dazai,” Chuuya hisses. “He would have found a way to make us eat!”

Yuan rubs her hand over her temple. “Oh my god, he’s going to serve *us* for dinner!”

“It will be fine… I think.”

“Fine?! We were caught red-handed!”

Yes, but…

Would Dazai really bother to take them out for dinner just to punish them? Besides, Chuuya has long since learned that the line he’s walking isn’t *that* fine, not when Dazai needs something that he will not get by losing Chuuya first.

“It will be fine,” Chuuya says again, squeezing her arm. “Just act natural.”

As soon as a waiter inside the restaurant spots them, or rather Dazai, he hurries over and directs them towards a roomy table next to a ginormous, shimmering aquarium, dozens of different fish swimming around. Yuan sits down next to Chuuya, and Dazai takes the seat across from him. Even though Chuuya insisted it would be fine, his heart is starting to hammer loudly inside his chest.

He’s gotten used to doing these kinds of things with Dazai. A little. But with Yuan here, he is not quite sure how to act anymore, so he buries his head in the menu before he sees all the *text* and, with a mute whimper, realizes that he’s still not good enough to read and understand 90% of these things!

“Chuuya,” he suddenly hears Dazai say, “do you like fish?”

Lowering the menu enough to meet his gaze, Chuuya blinks. Dazai looks as casual as ever, like the question is completely innocent, but Chuuya has a feeling he knows what he’s trying to do. And to be honest, he feels an immense wave of gratitude spill through his blood. “I do.”

“Then you should try *the Kinmedai no Netsuke*, number 49.”

“Okay,” Chuuya says, a soft puff escaping him as he tries to reign in a thankful smile. “Thank you.”

“I don’t like fish,” Yuan announces then.

“Good for you,” Dazai mutters. “There are enough other dishes to pick out from.”

Having spent his entire life with Yuan, Chuuya knows that she is not the least bit picky about her food and that fish has never been a problem before. Though, he does understand why she would act like that. It’s not every day that you get to spend a dinner with the head of the port mafia, after all. It’s not like Dazai is particularly nice to her either, definitely not as friendly as he is to Chuuya.

Even though Chuuya and Yuan order themselves water and coke, Dazai gets the waiter to bring them a bottle of red wine too, pouring each of them a glass. It looks pretty expensive, but as Chuuya is used to the cheap, boxed stuff, impressing him is not hard.

Dazai must notice him eyeing the bottle, so he nods at it. “Go on. Try it. It’s --” His lips clamp shut for a moment, then he smiles. “... my favorite.”

Curious, Chuuya lifts the glass to his lips and takes a small sip, letting the wine wash over his tongue and down his throat. His eyes widen immediately. “This tastes so good?!” Not just like burned gasoline that they used to drink to kill their brain cells and forget about their miserable lives for a night. This *really* tastes good. Something you drink because you genuinely enjoy doing it.

Cheek resting against his palm, Dazai just watches him take another sip, looking mighty content with this outcome.

“Wow,” Yuan suddenly says next to him, and Chuuya has to suppress cringing at himself for almost forgetting that she’s been here this

entire time, too. “This sure is good.”

“It’s from an ancient property in France’s Southern Rhône, near the town of Gigondas and situated in Mont Ventoux,” Dazai says with a faint shrug. “The owners… Nicole and Xavier Rolet have quite the magical touch when it comes to their wines.”

A flabbergasted laugh escapes Chuuya. “How do you even know that?”

“And what a coincidence that Chuuya is such a fan of France,” Yuan mutters under her breath. “Yeah. How do you know that? Do you do research on every wine before you flaunt it?”

Dazai barely acknowledges Yuan, instead choosing to play around with the napkin and only glance at Chuuya every so often. “Well, I’ve been to their winery once. It’s hard to forget such a beautiful residence.”

“You’ve been to France?” Chuuya can’t help but blurt out.

Dazai nods.

“How was it?”

“I was sent there to track a member that had either gone rogue or missing, so, unfortunately, I did not get to do a typical sightseeing tour, but it was still beautiful. My favorite thing were all the *boulangeries* and *pâtisseries* you could find at every corner.”

One might assume that Chuuya would have no idea what the foreign words mean, what with his inability to even properly master his native language, but truth be told, he knows *exactly* what *boulangerie* and *pâtisserie* means. French bakeries and pastry shops. Because he used to frantically obsess over anything related to France when he was younger, and apparently still does.

“That’s so…” Chuuya wants to say *cool* and maybe ask Dazai another few dozen questions, but he’s already shown too much excitement over this little fact anyway, so he collects himself and leans back in his seat, shifting his goofy expression into a calm nod. “Interesting. Very interesting.”

Across from him, Dazai squints ever so slightly before accepting the shift in the mood without another comment.

Chuuya wants to ask why Dazai came here in the first place and why his 'partner' didn't show up, but that could lead him to ask *Chuuya* why he came here. As long as Dazai is content to ignore the elephant in the room, Chuuya is, too. When he casts a glance towards Yuan, she's busy inspecting the labels on the wine bottle as if trying to confirm what Dazai told them.

"Yuan's first day with Kouyou is tomorrow," Chuuya says then. Perhaps it's a feeble attempt to break the ice between the two, but can you blame him? It feels awkward. Tense. "Thank you for talking to her."

Dazai hums. "So I've heard. Congratulations."

Yuan raises her chin as she looks at him. "Thanks."

"Don't come crying to Chuuya when you start regretting it, though."

Her face instantly balks. "I won't regret it, you —" She visibly stops herself from saying something stupid in the spur of the moment. She schools her expression into something more neutral. "Believe it or not, but I'm not as weak as you think."

"Whether you're weak or strong doesn't matter. Everything is breakable, in the end, and Kouyou knows that better than anyone."

Yuan just shakes her head, clearly refusing to believe it. A part of Chuuya understands her hesitancy to be spooked because Kouyou is tough, sure, and she does intimidate him, but other than that, she's not… that bad, right? Then again, he only really spent a few days directly working under her so far. He spent more time with Dazai if you add it all up. Plus, he caught his team, his 'subordinates' whispering to each other that they're glad they got Chuuya as a superior instead of Kouyou. So out of the two of them, who will know Kouyou better? Chuuya or Dazai?

"So why isn't Chuuya going to be there tomorrow?" Yuan asks then. "I thought he was working under Kouyou too?"

"Chuuya's busy," Dazai replies easily.

"Doing what?"

"Prepping for an important business. Nothing you should worry about."

Oh, yeah. *That* meeting is in a few days. Chuuya has avoided thinking about it so far, happy to pretend he won't have to deal with some random assholes and talk to them about shipping routes and money.

"Chuuya's my friend and family." Yuan's voice is impressively calm this time. "And 90% of the time, he is off doing god knows what. So forgive me for worrying why that is."

Chuuya sighs. "Yuan —"

"No, I think it's a valid concern?!"

"Chuuya is sitting right there," Dazai points out. "So maybe instead of interrupting him, just ask him."

Yuan doesn't look happy about it, but her expression still wilts like a flower. Thankfully, that's when the waiter decides to arrive with their food, the timing truly impeccable. The man sets down their places in front of each of them, starting with Dazai, of course, asks whether they want something else and then leaves as quietly as he appeared.

Having an excuse not to talk, Chuuya digs into his fish. Dazai must have really great taste because, once again, it's delicious, satisfying cravings that Chuuya never even knew he had.

Not even five minutes have passed when Dazai's phone buzzes. He fishes it out and glances at it intently before deciding to pick it up, brows furrowed ever so slightly. The person on the other end must speak first. Chuuya pauses when Dazai's eyes evidently fall to *him*.

Is his streak of luck finally ending?

Did someone call Dazai about the USB stick perhaps?

Will they —

"Thank you," Dazai says and hangs up, still looking at Chuuya. "Someone broke into your apartment."

The chopsticks between his fingers almost slip out. "What?"

Dazai taps some things on his phone, then slides it over the table so Chuuya can look at it. "I assume these belong to you."

Chuuya feels Yuan lean closer to have a look as well. They both stare at the grayscale video footage on the phone that shows a couple of people crowding in front of a door. Their faces are clearly the ones of

their friends. The sheep.

“Yeah,” he mutters. “Fuck.”

Yuan lets out a dry huff. “Those fuckers. Didn’t I say they would do something stupid?”

“It’s my fault,” Chuuya admits as he lifts his eyes to meet Dazai’s gaze. “I told them they could visit me. I just didn’t think they’d break in there.” Even though he expects to be met with irritation or maybe even anger, considering that’s the sheep clearly breaking very important rules, all he finds is a small, lopsided grin. Dazai doesn’t look bothered in the slightest.

“We can still finish the food and take care of it later if you want?”

As good as it tastes… “They’ll do something much worse than break the door if we wait,” Chuuya says. “We should probably go.”

“Very well. I’ll call a car for you two.”

Dazai somehow manages to catch the waiter to tell him to box their food so they can take it home — something Chuuya even sees Yuan be not only surprised by but a little glad since it would really be a waste to throw it all away. Apparently energized and ready to kick their friends’ asses, she takes the lead, and Chuuya uses that opportunity to turn back to Dazai.

“Thanks for all of this,” he says. “And I’m sorry about the sheep.”

God knows, the mafia has enough money for a broken door and a security system but somehow it still feels rude. Not only to Dazai but to Chuuya as well. What about *come visit me* screams *break into my apartment?* Especially when the sheep knew damn well what Chuuya and Yuan were doing at that time and that it could cost them if they got caught.

Across from him, Dazai turns a little and wraps his fingers around the bottle of wine before he offers it to Chuuya. “I have a feeling you will need it.”

Mouth hanging open slightly, Chuuya accepts it. His throat feels a little dry as he swallows.

“I’m sure you can handle them on your own, but if you need me to, I can come along.”

“I think,” Chuuya says slowly, “that would only add fuel to the fire.”

“Yeah.” Dazai’s chest falls with an exhale. “I figured.”

Chuuya’s not sure why he keeps standing there like there is more to say when there isn’t. Still, it takes him defiantly longer than it should to realize that Yuan is probably already waiting for him outside, wondering where he is. “Okay, I really gotta go before they break my bathtub or something. See you…?”

“Tomorrow?” Dazai finishes. “We can practice for the meeting.”

Chuuya nods. “Right. Tomorrow. See you then.”

Somehow his exit still feels a little rushed, more than a little awkward, and Chuuya ends up wandering blindly for a few minutes outside the hotel, looking for pink hair. Apparently, Yuan was waiting for him in the car already because he only sees her after she opens the door and waves him over.

As soon as he sits down, Chuuya lets his head fall back, and his eyes flutter shut, feeling like a month’s worth of energy, tension, and stress seep out of his body. “That was close.”

“That was *weird*,” Yuan says instead. “Is he — is he always like that with you?”

Opening his eyes again, Chuuya glances at her. “Like what?”

“So nice and chatty and, you know, looking at you like the sun shines out of your ass?”

“He definitely does not look at me like that,” Chuuya retorts with a frown. What the hell?

Yuan raises one brow. “I might be exaggerating a teeny tiny but, but that man does not look at you like he looks at me.”

“Well, duh. You don’t have to spend as much time with him as I do.”

“Chuuya, honey, I don’t think *that’s* what makes us different.” Head shaking, she crosses her arms, clearly mulling over things. “Something is off with this guy. The way he talks to you… didn’t you think it was strange when he talked about France?”

“What exactly is supposed to be strange about that?”

“It’s like he knew you turn into a little fanboy every time someone mentions the country.”

Chuuya snorts. “Okay, I know you’re trying to understand his motives — trust me, I do too, and *I fail every time* — this is absurd. France has good wines. It’s really nothing crazy. And he visited their winery. I’d mention it too.”

“Yeah, he was there for a *mission*, but somehow he got time to visit a winery?” Yuan makes a vague hand gesture. “Does that sound logical to you? Because it sounds like bullshit to me.”

Okay, she has a point with that. Still.

“Maybe the mission was in the winery?”

Yuan turns to shoot him a bewildered look. “Seriously. And since when are you trying so hard to defend him?”

“I’m not defending him!” Chuuya’s hands curl and uncurl in frustration. “All I’m saying is that you’re getting worked up over things that don’t really matter in the end. Who cares that Dazai bought french wine?!”

“Okay,” she says, “then let’s talk about things that do matters, like, say, for example, the fact that he literally caught us spying on him and then didn’t even mention it. And that ‘I was supposed to meet someone there’ sounded like total bullshit. What was that about then?”

Chuuya lets out a long sigh. “I have a theory about that.”

Yuan wordlessly tells him to go on.

“I don’t believe that he was going to meet someone there either,” he relents, “but rather that he somehow knew the flash drive was opened, and that’s why he went there? Does that make sense?”

“I guess.” Yuan’s long painted nails tap against her crossed arms. “Let’s ask Misao since we’re about to see her anyway.”

That reminder makes Chuuya rub his hands over his forehead as memories of the sheep’s past break-ins flash through his mind. It always ended up with either a huge party or a total demolition of everything inside, which amounts to the same thing because things get broken either way.

“Why would they do that?” Chuuya wonders aloud. It’s a little quiet, a little sad. “They have to know how dangerous it could have been for us, for *you,* if things hadn’t turned out the way they did?”

“I’d say they’re just acting out against the mafia, but..” She makes a humph-ing sound. “It’s not like they are being mistreated or anything. To be honest, I think it’s Luca.”

Chuuya’s head slowly turns to her. Silent.

Yuan meets his gaze. “Did you hear the way he talked about…?”

“About abilities?” Chuuya breathes out a humorless laugh. “Yeah. It’s like he really believes that they’re inherently bad.” Like *Chuuya* is.

And it’s not that Chuuya claims to be a saint. Because he isn’t. He has done things awful things that hurt others. But not because he’s a damn ability user.

“Can’t wait for him to see your dragon egg,” Yuan jokes.

However, that makes Chuuya realize that she is right. The sheep are inside his apartment.

Their heads snap towards each other.

“The dragon egg.”

Thankfully, it’s only five minutes to the base, but Chuuya still spends them pestering the poor driver to floor it. There’s an awful, dark feeling inside his chest that tells him that Kafka will no longer *be* once they arrive. That it will be too late.

Yuan seems to share the same worries — thank god — so they kick off at the speed of light as soon as the car comes to a halt, bumping into and almost running over a few people on their way to Chuuya’s floor.

Muffled bass and music come from inside when they arrive, and Chuuya doesn’t bother using his key card since the door will have to get fixed anyway, making his entrance by kicking in the thing. In any other case, he would be happy to do that again. Not now, though.

Now he’s just pissed.

His friends are spread all over the place. Some are in the kitchen, opening and closing cabinets in the search for liquor probably, others are in the living room, cigarettes and joins dangling from between

their lips, and it's so loud that they don't even notice Chuuya barging in.

And Luca —

Luca is lounging in the lover's seat next to the couch like a goddamn self-proclaimed king with a bottle of *beer* in his hands, and a few of the others spread around him.

After Chuuya sets aside the food and the bottle of wine on the kitchen counter, not bothering to greet his friends there, he stomps over to that idiot. Luca's mouth curves into a stupid smirk when he sees him coming.

"Hey, Chuuya. How did Yuan's and your little mission go?"

Chuuya slaps the beer out of his hand in reply. The bottle splashes and shatters into a thousand pieces on the closest wall.

Luca blinks.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Chuuya hisses.

Someone tugs at his sleeve. It's Shiro. "Chuuya-san, you said we could hang out here?"

"Or was that just another lie?" Luca mutters, frowning at the thin line of red on his hand.

Sighing, Chuuya crouches down in front of Shiro. "You can, but you guys broke in here… and the people who own this apartment, powerful people, saw that you did. It's dangerous. You could have gotten hurt. Yuan and I could have."

"But we didn't," Luca points out, ever so thankfully. "No one did anything. So why are you mad?"

"That's only because we talked to the boss before he sent out his men," Yuan suddenly cuts in from behind. "We said we'd take care of it. If we hadn't done that in time, you guys would have been in deep shit. And for what?" She holds up a bottle. "A little party with *beer?* You couldn't manage to get something stronger?"

"Oi, it's still noon." And that's Shirase. Chuuya didn't even notice that he was here, too. "We were waiting for you two to join the party." Then he squats down in front of a shopping bag and fishes out several

bottles of hard liquor with a cheerful grin. “So how about it? You guys talked to the big boss, everything’s fine, and I think we all deserve a little fun after the last few weeks. Am I right, or am I right?”

Everyone in the apartment cheers. Someone turns the music even louder.

Of course, they think Shirase is right.

Chuuya doesn’t. Not really. He thinks they’re acting like spoiled, entitled children who don’t realize that they’re not just kids on the street anymore. That they can’t simply break the rules, get drunk, and do whatever the hell they want anymore.

But he doesn’t bother voicing any of that out loud, not unless he truly wants them to start hating him.

And honestly, maybe it’s even better that way. Perhaps if they stay out of the games of the mafia and of Dazai, they will also stay safe. And if that means Chuuya will have to do it all on his own, that’s fine. Probably easier, too.

He disappears into his bedroom to check out the damage they’ve done to it, only to find that the dragon egg is gone. Heart slamming wildly, he lifts the bed to see if it perhaps rolled under it, and nope. Not there either. He scours his entire room for it, but it’s gone.

Someone probably saw it decided that it’s… a toy or something like that, so it’s most likely still somewhere in the apartment.

Please let it be still there, he prays to the gods above.

Since the real party has begun, it’s even louder. His friends slowly start to get more and more drunk, which is good because they probably won’t notice Chuuya searching every corner of his apartment and crawling on the floors. But also dangerous because they could accidentally destroy the egg in the process.

Chuuya’s trying to see whether the egg is somewhere under the couch when he has the misfortune of overhearing what his friends are talking about.

“ — and they’re really smart about it, too. They even have a party in the national diet.”

“I don’t know, dude. Do you really wanna put your trust in a religious

group? When has that ever worked out?"

"Okay, sure, but you can't deny that they're effective. Not even the freaking SDFUP or the government has managed to get rid of that many ability users."

"Yeah, probably because that's blatant discrimination?"

"Oh, come on. Ability users can do whatever and kill as many people as they want, but when it's normal people fighting back, it's suddenly discrimination?"

"Dude…"

"I agree that some of 'em are… bad… but don't you think that's too generalizing?"

"If ability users are that bad, then why did you fuck one, Luca?"

"Hahaha!"

"Pfft, shut up. *He* is the best example. He's a good guy but look at him now. Sucking up to the mafia-like he was born to be here. And it's not like his ability doesn't affect him either. C'mon now, we all saw it, right? He is not as in control as he pretends to be all the time."

The music becomes somewhat muffled, echoing around Chuuya in thumping, dizzying repetitions. He blinks, then blinks again and looks down and —

The red glow of *the tainted sorrow* outlines his hands, and he quickly lifts them, wills his ability to go the fuck away before he accidentally breaks through the floor. When nothing happens except for his chest rising and falling with shallow breaths, Chuuya opens his eyes again.

"-- whether you want to or not, you should still involve him."

"Who gives a damn about our rules when we're not even ourselves anymore either?"

Chuuya doesn't want to listen to another word of this. He gets to his feet, not caring about whether his people see him either, and starts searching for his egg again.

In the end, he finds it in the kitchen next to a couple of avocados that Dazai brought him a few days ago. Admittedly, they do look *somewhat* alike if avocados were much bigger and had scales. He stuffs it into an

empty shopping bag and hides it on a shelf, hoping his friends won't find it this time.

He tries. For a few hours, he tries to stay at his own party, talk to his friends, and pretend like he's enjoying this like he used to enjoy the parties before all this. But soon, Yuan leaves with the explanation that she needs to get up early the next day, and she tries to get as many people to come with her as possible. She fails. Their friends, when drunk, are defiant, irritating brats. And Chuuya keeps hearing what Luca said about him. That he's not in control. That his ability is bad, evil. If it came from any other person, he would have a good laugh about it and maybe even put on a show for entertainment purposes, but…

It's different when something like that comes from the people that are supposed to be your friends. Very different when they actually believe in the false information that they spew.

The thing that ultimately tops it off is Shirase puking into his bed.

That is when Chuuya grabs the dragon egg, the bottle of wine and decides that it's time to leave. And there is only one place that he really has to go to right now.

When Chuuya started shadowing Dazai, he finally got that key card he was so passionate about on his first day, which means that getting to the top floor is not a problem. The question is whether Dazai will even let him in.

Chuuya takes his time waltzing down the dark hallway, only illuminated by the city lights outside, and swinging the bag with Kafka in it back and forth. He stops eventually in case it's bad for the poor egg.

His throat is thick when he stops in front of Dazai's office and the four men that are stationed in front of it. "I'm here to see the boss," he says, holding up his ID card. "Nakahara Chuuya."

The guard on the far right taps his earpiece and mutters something that's not loud enough for Chuuya to catch. However, not even a few moments later, a clicking sound echoes through the space before they open the double solid door to let him through.

Chuuya's sneakers echo through the dim-lit office as he turns the corner and makes his way inside. The desk is abandoned, but there is a light coming from the place where the couches are, so he makes his

way towards it. The lamp is turned on on the coffee table. No one's there, though.

Just when he's about to go back to the desk and return the USB stick, one of the doors opens, and Dazai comes out. He's not wearing the scarf or the coat or even the jacket of his suit anymore. Just his white shirt, a few buttons unpopped like he was just about to change but got interrupted. He also looks tired.

…

"Chuuya?"

Chapter 8: The Thumbscrew

Chapter Notes

Hi, hello, I'm back with a long-awaited update <3

“Chuuya?”

Realizing he's staring, he clears his throat. “I…” He could probably find an excuse for why he is here. He wants to hide the dragon egg (and hide himself.) Use all the time he has to prep for that meeting. Practice writing and reading. But all of that seems to fall flat right now, so he settles on the simple truth: “Someone puked into my bed.”

Dazai’s head tilts. “Oh. I’m sorry.”

But maybe that was a wrong decision because what is Dazai supposed to do about that? Chuuya can’t —

“Lucky for you, there is more than enough space for you here.” Dazai taps the couch before passing him to saunter to the other side of the room, opening a cabinet. “Take the couch if you want.”

Chuuya watches him take out two glasses. “You don’t mind?”

“Well, it’s been a while since I had someone stay over.” Dazai *winks.* “So I might be a little rus—”

“Shut up.” Since Chuuya is carrying a bottle and Dazai is carrying glasses, it’s not hard to figure out what they’re for. “Gimme that,” he mutters, reaching out to help himself to a glass after he finds Kafka a warm, cushioned spot on the couch.

“Don’t worry, no one’s going to steal that bottle away, Chuuya. In fact, I have quite a few more in my arsenal.”

“I’m not worried about that. I just… I could really use a drink right now.”

Dazai doesn’t go out of his way to tease him about it. Instead he gestures for Chuuya to hold out his glass so he can pour the wine inside before doing the same for himself and settling next to Chuuya where he’s leaning against the back of the couch.

“We can buy you a new bed,” he offers after Chuuya takes a few sips.

“You don’t have to sleep in that.”

Snorting out a dry breath, Chuuya shoots him a flat look. “I don’t need a new bed just because someone puked in it.”

Dazai wrinkles his nose. “But it’s unhygienic.”

“Yeah, that’s what *laundry* is for, dumbass. I’ll force Shirase to clean it up in the morning. I just didn’t want to sleep there tonight.”

Dazai purses his lips but doesn’t pushy any further than that.

Silence falls over them, but it’s neither tense nor awkward. On the contrary, it’s relaxing. Soothing. And it’s strange that out of all places and out of all people, Chuuya would find this kind of comfort here. With Dazai.

At the same time, something in his chest clumps together because this is not only fleeting but probably not real either.

“Another glass?” Dazai asks.

Chuuya makes a face when he sees that his glass is indeed already empty. It’s not *his* fault that this is the most delicious wine he’s ever drunk. Too damn good to savor it. “Yeah,” he sighs and watches Dazai pour him another one. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure,” Dazai says, placing the empty bottle on the floor.

“Do you think abilities are inherently evil?” Dazai’s expression doesn’t change, still as relaxed and content as ever, yet he does not speak right away either. “You know how you said that some flowers bloom better in the dark? Do you think the same of abilities then?” Chuuya adds.

“I think equalizing something like an ability with inherent moral corruption is something only a simple-minded idiot would do. So to answer your question, no.”

“Okay,” Chuuya says, fingers tightening around his glass. “Different question. Do you think *some* abilities are evil?”

Dazai looks at him. “That would imply they have their own consciousness.”

Chuuya meets his gaze but doesn’t speak. After all, the second question is still left unanswered.

Making a soft noise in the back of his throat, Dazai understands and seems to consider it once more. “I once read that abilities are powered by the user’s soul and will, like an energy source of sorts. It makes sense to me. The ability is dictated by the soul that drives it. Not the other way around.”

Chuuya knows it’s the most logical conclusion — although he hasn’t ever heard it worded like Dazai did — but his chest falls anyway. If anyone had had a different, extraordinary take on this specific topic, it would have been someone like Dazai. And if it’s not him, then Chuuya might as just accept his fate.

To his surprise, though, Dazai is not done.

“Singularities, on the other hand… are trickier. They can act on their own. However, they’re still not sentient beings, so can you really say they’re evil when they just do what’s in their nature?” Dazai tilts his head this way and that. Contemplating. “I would say that a singularity can make its host do things the host wouldn’t do, yes. That’s a thing.”

It’s like the dark, gloomy cloud that has been looming over Chuuya suddenly bursts into sparkles. He can’t help the smile on his face as much as he can’t help but look at Dazai with excitement. “So it’s not just as black and white as good vs evil, right? Sometimes it’s not that easy!”

“I would even argue that it’s never that easy,” Dazai replies.

Chuuya frowns then, remembering something else. Lifting the hand holding the glass, he lets *the tainted sorrow* run free, glowing bright and red and hot around him as it works to keep the glass afloat in the air. “I know they’re not sentient beings, but don’t you think they feel that way sometimes?” It might be stupid, but Chuuya has always felt like his ability is a companion, a dear and helpful friend, instead of simply an ability. It gets groggy when he doesn’t use it for a long time. Excited when Chuuya calls on it. Tired when it doesn’t catch a break. *For the tainted sorrow* feels real. Alive. And that other thing…

It feels like something living, too.

Distracted by these thoughts, Chuuya doesn’t realize that he phrases his question in a way that assumes Dazai has an ability, too. Considering he’s here in the port mafia, it certainly wouldn’t be a surprise, but it’s not a prerequisite either. When he glances to his side, though, Dazai is watching the glass with a strange, sad smile on his face.

Unsure of what to do, what to say, hell, what to feel about that expression, Chuuya moves the glass, intending to bump it against Dazai's chest except that when it does, it just falls to the floor and shatters. All over Dazai's feet and the neat floor.

"Woopsie."

"I —" Chuuya feels his face flush in embarrassment. He can't even control his own ability anymore? He's *that* drunk? "Fuck, sorry," he mutters, squatting down to clean up the mess he made.

"Chuuya, you don't have to —"

"I spilled it; of course, I have to." Except that Chuuya makes the mistake of looking up and seeing Dazai above him, tall and looming and still as unruffled as ever, even in the face of Chuuya's idiotic and very uncharacteristic clumsiness. That makes the fact that Chuuya's heart starts slamming wildly in his chest that much more illogical. It's just a stupid broken glass and a few tiny shards in Dazai's slacks. Chuuya's not kneeling before him like an obedient, faithful follower — something Dazai never made him do even though he's the boss. Not anything else of this sort either. No need to get so fucking flustered over it.

But maybe Dazai does mind because a hand not so gently tugs at the collar of Chuuya's shirt in the next moment. "Get up here."

"Ouch," Chuuya mutters under his breath, scratching the back of his neck.

"Just do your magic from here," Dazai tells him, already turning away. "I'll get something to clean it up."

While waiting Chuuya picks up the pool of red liquid and pours it back into the bottle with his ability. Of course, it's not drinkable anymore. A shame, really. Such a lovely wine, and Chuuya wasted his last glass. And for what? His ability seems to work just fine now.

A few minutes pass; Chuuya gets antsy, wondering if Dazai forgot about him. Then he remembers the flash drive in his pocket, though, and decides to use the opportunity to return it to its original place, except that when he tries to fish it out, it's not there.

Frowning, Chuuya checks his other pockets. Empty, too.

Did he lose it? Unlikely.

So where…

Chuuya walks over to the desk, straining to hear whether Dazai is about to come back and when the office remains perfectly silent, he opens that fake box of candles again and —

The flash drive is already there. *The one that Chuuya stole from him.*

He knows because they're all differently colored, and this one was the only one in a mint-green shade.

But it's right *there.*

Which either means, Chuuya's own memories are fucking with him, or… Dazai somehow found out and stole it back already.

That's when he also hears approaching footsteps, so Chuuya hurries back to the couch, albeit with a swarm of confusion buzzing inside him. Dazai comes back carrying a white bucket, blankets, *and* clothes, which he dumps on the couch. He looks the same as before, no trace of anger over stolen flashdrives, not even a hint of smugness.

"Do you have an entire storage room back there?" Chuuya asks as he lets the pile of broken shards float into the bucket, deciding to give up on the topic of flashdrives for now unless he wants to drive himself insane.

"No," Dazai says with a hum, "just my living quarters."

"Just your —" Chuuya cuts himself off and shakes his head. "How much are we talking about? Is it as big as my place?" He wouldn't be surprised. After all, there is an entire floor of space…, and the only thing Chuuya has seen is Dazai's office and the hallways, although big they are not nearly enough to cover everything. He knows Gin has an office too, but he doubts it makes up the rest of the floor.

"Heh, I don't need as much as Chuuya. It's just a bedroom, kitchen, and bathroom. Well… and a Jacuzzi. But that's it."

"I don't need that much either," Chuuya feels like pointing out. "I never asked for that penthouse." He would have been just fine sharing quarters with his friends as per usual. Maybe if he had, half of them wouldn't think of him some soulless monster right now.

"But you deserve it."

“Yeah, and what did I do to deserve something that nice?” Chuuya wants to know, *really* wants to know.

Dazai, who is busy playing maid and spreading out the blankets over the couch, shrugs. “I’d say putting up with those ungrateful friends of yours is a pretty big achievement. But you can also think of it as a consolation prize for having to marry me if that makes you feel better.”

Maybe *that’s* Chuuya’s opening, even if it this discussion borders on an honest conversation about the sheep.

“They’re not ungrateful. They’re just scared.”

“Didn’t you protect them for the last… how many years?”

He met them when he was seven.

He first discovered what he could with his ability a few months later. Still seven as far as he remembers.

“Thirteen years.”

“For the last thirteen years,” Dazai finishes.

“Tch, it’s what everyone would have done. I had an ability that I could use to fight and defend them from shitty people. They didn’t, and they were *kids*. Nothing to be grateful for.”

“But you were a child yourself.”

“With an ability,” Chuuya deadpans. “Keep up, Dazai.”

“Okay, so you basically gave up your whole childhood to protect a bunch of helpless kids. Maybe to you, it seems like a given, but not everyone would have done that. I know I wouldn’t have.”

Chuuya sighs even if he actually wants to laugh because of Dazai’s touch for dramatics. “I didn’t give up my whole childhood. My childhood was just fine.”

“Of course, you did,” Dazai shoots back like it’s the most self-evident conclusion in the world. “That’s why you’re so full of tension all the time.”

“Hah?”

“Look at you. You get a penthouse, and you don’t even use it properly; you just feel guilty about it. You come here, and you immediately want to work. Not only that but you want to be *perfect* at it because what would you do if you weren’t? You’re interested in something, but you don’t allow yourself to ask more questions because god forbid you like something. There is a cabinet full of wine here that you clearly like, and yet you don’t ask for more. Even your body.” Chuuya’s breath stutters as Dazai’s fingers touch one point after another, his shoulder, his neck, and the center of his chest. “Tense. Tense. Tense. You always had to be the responsible one when you were a child, so you never learned how to relax and have fun. You still don’t know how.”

“So what,” Chuuya gets out through clenched teeth, “you’re saying I should screw everything and start acting like a kid?!”

“I’m saying that you’re allowed to let loose every once in a while,” Dazai tells him. His smile is too understanding. Too fucking tender to not feel mocked by it. “You don’t have to be in control all the time. Not here. Live a little. Have fun. Or god forbid, do something that *you* want for once.”

“You know, for someone who is so intent on making *me* do all his duties, you talk a lot about letting loose,” Chuuya snaps. How is he supposed to relax *and* play the shadow-boss that Dazai wants him to be? (Not to mention that *this* is only the part of the picture that Dazai knows about… of all the times to relax, this is not it. Chuuya will have time for that later someday. Whenever that is.)

“Yes, yes, but the job is not your entire life,” Dazai retorts. “There are other ways to let go.”

Letting go? Giving up control? Even the thought makes his heart race, knowing that a thousand things could and probably will go wrong if he stops paying attention for just one second.

“Is that how you do this every day then?” Chuuya prompts because he’s tired of always talking about himself.

“Hey egg,” Dazai greets Kafka and carefully places it on the coffee table before he lets himself collapse on the couch, stretching out his arms and folding them behind his neck. “I’m as relaxed as a mackerel fish.”

“And yet you don’t sleep.” What about *that* is relaxing?

“Maybe that’s what keeps me so relaxed,” Dazai says, waggling his eyebrows.

It makes Chuuya remember that tiny moment from earlier. Are the nightmares a frequent thing for him? Is that why he prefers short naps over actual sleep?

“I still doubt it’s good for your body,” Chuuya says.

“Yes, well, what you do isn’t any better. Ain’t we a pair?”

Such striking opposites of each other that they’re almost… similar.

That realization has Chuuya’s mind jump in all sorts of direction again, so he decides to cut it off right here and now. “I’m tired. Can I use your bathroom?”

“You can even use the Jacuzzi,” Dazai calls after him as Chuuya grabs the clothes — a black, silky yakuza with a design of pink roses. He both hopes that it’s just a spare change that Dazai had in his closet and is thankful that he had anything at all. Sleeping in jeans is something that Chuuya doesn’t miss doing at all.

“Ha, ha,” Chuuya deadpans.

He doesn’t get any answers because he’s already through the door, entering a small, dark hallway that leads to another door, this one leading into a bedroom, just as Dazai said. It’s really not that big, smaller than Chuuya’s. The bed still looks spacious and comfortable, swallowed by all-black sheets, blankets and pillows. The things that strike out the most are the windows covering the entire wall and offering a really nice view over the city, just like the office. Chuuya wonders whether Dazai was lying when he once explained that he kept the windows shut to protect himself from any assassination attempts or whether he simply… does not spend enough time here to bother closing them.

Still deep in thought, Chuuya almost gets a heart attack when something *moves* on the bed —

It’s not something, though. It’s a *cat!*

The cat stretches out their paws and blinks lazily at Chuuya with large, round green eyes, the only thing that’s not black about them, before deciding to go back to sleep. For a moment, Chuuya is not sure what to do. Does he just *ignore* the fact that a cat is sleeping in Dazai

Osamu's bedroom?

He probably should. All he wanted was to wash his face and take a piss, but the cat just looks so fluffy and cute and —

Chuuya's in front of the bed before he can count to three, stretching out a tentative hand to the little creature so they can smell him first. The cat does, testing the waters for a few seconds before they eventually butt their soft head against his fingers, giving him the permission to pet.

"Aren't you a sweet, little thing?" Chuuya whispers and sits down on the edge of the bed, utterly enamored within seconds. "Don't you get bored all alone in this room? Why does your owner keep you all to himself, huh?" He knows that this isn't just an extremely odd coincidence because of the pink collar around their neck. Well, at least, he assumes that's proof enough that this is actually Dazai's cat. God knows cats can be pretty invasive animals that don't care about anyone's boundaries — as long as it's not theirs.

Apparently, the cat is pretty trusting since they get up and climb on his lap, starting to knead his thighs as they purr contently and let Chuuya scratch their chin.

"I love you," Chuuya declares. "You are the cutest, most adorable kitty I have ever seen."

They do stop making biscuits at some point and just settle down on his legs, still purring, so what else is there to do but keep petting her? Chuuya's not a *monster*. It does make him lose track of time though, so he is not sure how long it's been when he hears the sound of foot steps.

Chuuya sheepishly lifts his gaze to see Dazai lean against the wall, folding his arms over his chest. He doesn't look surprised to find him here. Only amused. "And here I was thinking you actually took my advice and decided to check out the Jacuzzi."

"Fuck the Jacuzzi," Chuuya murmurs, stroking the cat's head. "Found something a thousand times better. This *is* your cat, right?"

"I guess you could say that she is mine."

"So what's her name?"

"Jiji."

“Aww, *Jiji…”* At the sound of her name, her ears twitch a bit, but that’s the only sign she gives of hearing anything. “She’s so *cute*.”

“I’m surprised she even let you touch her. It took her months to stop hissing at me. Gin is the only one that she likes, but men… are kind of icky.”

“You took her in?”

Dazai shrugs. “Heard her howling under a dumpster. It was distracting me from my mission.”

“You know, I’m starting to think that the whole *‘you never leave the building*’ thing was just a lie you made up so people wouldn’t try to find you outside.”

Pushing away from the wall, Dazai chuckles. “That was before I took over this dump — but it’s a marvelous idea, Chuuya. I like the way you think.”

Chuuya rolls his eyes. Although he can’t help but remember what Dazai said about the sheep earlier: *I wouldn’t.* And yet, here Dazai is, crouching down in front of the *stray cat* that he took in. Maybe they’re not so different, after all.

“Doesn’t she get antsy being locked away here all day?” Chuuya asks quietly. He’s not a cat, but he definitely wouldn’t like it.

“I know you think of me as the villain, but I’m not *that* horrible.” It’s supposed to be a joke, Chuuya thinks. It sounds like that, at least. “She has plenty of opportunities to destroy my office, but I bring her over to Gin when someone comes around. Or else, people would get stupid ideas.”

Who knew that the fearsome head of the port mafia is co-parenting a stray cat with his secretary?

“You did not have to hide her from me, you know. I love cats, and Jiji is precious.”

“I’m not hiding her now.”

“Yes, because I found her,” Chuuya points out.

Dazai’s eye glimmers as he strokes his cat’s chin with his nails. “Well, maybe I just wanted you in my bedroom.”

Narrowing his eyes, Chuuya stares him down for a few seconds before clicking his tongue. “Very funny.”

For a while, they just sit there — well, Dazai is, more or less, on the ground — and pamper the cat with pets and ear scratches. Jiji purs so hard that she even starts drooling. It’s both gross and adorable.

“Okay, princess.” Dazai pokes Jiji’s belly eventually. “Leave Chuuya alone now. He needs his beauty rest.”

But Chuuya only pets her harder. “Stop it. Leave her alone.”

Dazai raises his brows. “Are you really willing to give up on sleep to pet the cat?”

“Yeah?” Chuuya answers like it’s not obvious already. “I don’t care about sleep.”

“Sure you don’t.”

Dazai sounds so convinced that he does that it makes Chuuya want to argue even harder because he really doesn’t. Sleep is nice, but sleep also means losing precious time of the day that could be used for something more productive. The association has stuck up to this day, even when he doesn’t have to scour the streets for food anymore.

“Wake me up at five in the morning,” he says with a shrug, “see if I care.”

Dazai opens his mouth, then closes it again. For some reason, he looks kind of bummed out by that. Maybe it’s just the wine, though, making Chuuya see things that aren’t really there. And who is he anyway to believe he can read someone like Dazai?

“You know what, you might as well sleep here,” Dazai finally says as he gets to his feet.

Chuuya’s eyes widen in horror. “Hah?”

With Dazai’s hands in the pockets of his slacks, he sounds completely nonchalant when he tells him, “I wouldn’t dare to separate you two.”

“It’s all right,” Chuuya quickly says, though he still doesn’t stop petting Jiji. Not yet, but he *will*. “I don’t have to sleep here. Really.”

“Relax, I haven’t touched this bed in a week. And I change the sheets every few days.”

It's not because of that. (Although it is nice to know that Chuuya's not currently sitting on sheets that weren't involved in god knows what Dazai is up to in his free time — or alone time.) It's the idea of sleeping in Dazai Osamu's bed in itself that is insane.

Chuuya opens his mouth, but just like that, Dazai says, "so good night," and is already out of the room, leaving Chuuya staring after him.

After he manages to get his tongue back, he glances down at Jiji and shakes his head. "Your owner is crazy. And really confusing."

So incredibly confusing that it makes Chuuya's head spin every time he is around him.

He does not intend on spending the night here, but he does let himself fall back just to test out the mattress and look at the ceiling.

Chuuya is very surprised to find *stars* there. Not real ones, of course, but some kind of ceiling decor that he has never seen before. They almost look like they're glowing, although they're too dim to do so. Maybe they used to?

Lying there, he wonders if Dazai put them there or if the stars were already here before he became the boss. He wonders what kind of person would decorate their ceiling with glowing stars. He wonders if it was perhaps a child.

Perhaps he wonders too much, especially lying in such a comfortable bed with a cat in his lap and a chest full of sweet, warm French wine. Because one thought turns heavy, then the other, and soon it feels like Chuuya no longer controls gravity but like gravity controls him as it presses him down, down, down.

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Something *loud* and *moist* tugs him out of sleep the next morning. Chuuya blinks his eyes open only to see the damn cat headbutting his armpits and making odd, funny noises.

"Oi," he mutters, trying to shove her away as gently as possible because she is a treasure, but that fucking tickles. "Stop it. Stop trying to —" Finally, he sits up, and only then does he notice that he is *still* in Dazai's bedroom, still in his bed, *and* under his sheets. "Fucking hell."

Judging by the way his pants uncomfortably press against his belly, he

wasn't sleepy enough to undress, but still. He insisted he wouldn't sleep here, and here he fucking is, stretched out like a starfish as if it was his own damn bed! And he must have even taken off his shoes last night because only his white socks peek up from under the blanket!

(In Dazai Osamu's bed!)

(Dazai —)

He hurries to get up, Jiji following him off the bed, and does a 180 in front of the door that leads to the office because he decides to go to the bathroom first. Since he clearly got distracted last night, this is the first time seeing it. Dark-themed, modern and petite, just like the bedroom and the kitchen… well, except for the Jacuzzi overlooking the skyline. That just screams *mafia boss.*

After he's finished, he heads outside, almost stumbling over Jiji in the process because she follows him around like he's her mother hen. Not that he minds, but she looks like she wants something to eat, and he's still a bit groggy, and not in the mood to rummage through Dazai's kitchen.

Chuuya will just ask Jiji's owner to give her something to eat, slip out of his office and go home to change, and everyone will be happy.

Except he never even anticipated Dazai not to be alone when he comes out of *his* bedroom.

It's just Gin. The two of them apparently having breakfast together.

But the way it must look for him to strut out of here…

"Good Morning, Chuuya ~"

Chuuya scratches his arm as he slowly approaches the two of them.

Gin acknowledges him with a shy smile, but they don't really linger on him either.

"Hi," he croaks out, his voice thick with sleep.

Jiji trots over to Dazai and jumps on his lap, demanding that he share his food with her. And Dazai seems all too willing to offer her a piece with his chopsticks. Right until —

"If she has diarrhea again, I'm not going to be the one cleaning it up,"

Gin says flatly.

Dazai betrays his cat and narrowly avoids feeding her. “My apologies, Jiji, but for such a small creature, you can be really stinky, and I have a sensitive nose.”

“Um,” Chuuya clears his throat, “what time is it?”

“Eight in the morning,” Dazai provides as he gets up and brushes past him, probably to feed his cat.

Chuuya’s stomach growls as he lets his gaze sway over the food on the desk. He should probably eat something as well, but if his apartment already looked terrible last night, then it probably will look like hell today. Yet he doesn’t feel like he should take up more of Dazai’s… things than he already has, so he gives Gin a nod, trying not to cringe when he thinks about what possible reason one has to sleep in someone’s very personal, intimate bedroom, and goes to grab the dragon egg. Kafka is back on the couch and surrounded by pillows. That must have been Dazai’s doing.

“Nakahara-san!” That’s Gin. Chuuya looks over his shoulder, blinking. “I’m going to the gym today, and I could use a sparring partner. If you are still interested and are free… you could join me?”

“Oh,” he says dumbly. Then he remembers to nod. “Sure. That sounds great.”

Not only has Chuuya been planning to check out the gym here for a while now, but he could use the physical exertion as well. There is this painfully familiar feeling of rippling energy trying to break out of his skin, and if he doesn’t do something to keep it under control, it will only grow more restless. More demanding.

“Meet me there in an hour. Is that okay?” Gin asks.

Chuuya smirks. “Perfect.”

His excitement wanes considerably in the elevator, but when the doors slide open, and Chuuya is fully prepared to get hit with the smell of cheap vodka, excess sweat, and whatever else his friends were up to last night, the only thing that greets him is the sight of his *clean* apartment. His nose even detects a hint of vanilla and lemongrass in the air.

Puzzled, Chuuya walks through the living room and looks around. It’s

empty, but his friends must have actually bothered to clean up after themselves. When he enters his bedroom, his sheets have been changed too. How the hell did they even know where to find all those things?

To be honest, he doesn't care. Chuuya just kicks off his pants, tosses his shirt aside, and steps into the shower as happy as a lark. Because this small but important gesture means that sheep aren't completely irresponsible. They *do* care.

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Chuuya has been to a fair share of gyms in his life; he pretended to do trial sessions even though he knew he would never become a member, and broke into a few at night when the employees weren't looking too closely, but he has never been to one as someone who actually is allowed to be there. He's been avoiding it so far because it's still the mafia's, and the entire point of all their plans is to leave eventually, right? Not exploit all the luxuries it offers. But… if the sheep can throw parties and drink, Chuuya thinks he is allowed to work out every once in a while. And maybe Dazai made a point when he told him to find a way to let loose once in a while. Working out *is* relaxing. It's the best method to release tension and stress.

Needless to say, Chuuya's excited when he enters the gym, the smell of sweat and steel welcoming him.

It's *huge.* That's the first thing he notices. *Different than a normal gym,* is the second. There are the usual rows and rows of sleek-black machines and cardio equipment and then there are the weapons, the faceless mannequins with targets on their bodies and the state-of-the-art fight simulations. Shimmering silhouettes running and dissolving into nothing when a knife pierces them. This feels more like a military training center than a gymnasium. Then again, this is the port mafia they're talking about. He's still taking it all in, making mental notes of all the things he wants to check out later when he sees Gin weave their way through the gym in a plain black tracksuit.

"You should warm up first, do some stretches," they say instead of a greeting before nodding at one of the doors. "The sparring area is over there. I'll be waiting for you."

"Sounds like a plan," Chuuya replies.

He's never been much of a runner but aside from a few basic stretches to loosen his muscles, the treadmill sounds like the easiest and fastest

way to get into it. As soon as he picks up the pace, lungs working as his feet hit the treadmill over and over, his body seems to agree. The jittery live energy inside him howling with its fangs wide open, howling but seeping out of him in the shape of the drops of sweat that roll over his forehead and chest.

There are days when this is all it takes: powering himself out until Chuuya stops feeling *it*. Other times, most often than not, it's not as simple as working out or using *for the tainted sorrow*. He could run a hundred miles and still feel a gaping hole in his chest craving more, something more substantial than this, something more destructive and powerful, and when physical exertion is all that Chuuya has to offer, that thing gets angry. It demands carnage. Death. Pure annihilation. It wants to be used. Not kept inside.

He always ends up like this then: lungs on fire, mind a glorious white canvas of fog, and sweat pouring down his back like a waterfall. It still doesn't feel like quite enough, like he won't be able to outrun whatever gaping hole has taken possession of him no matter how hard and fast his feet hit the ground, but it feels good nonetheless. Better than standing still.

He only slows down when Gin appears in front of them, their brows raising quietly until Chuuya presses the button that will allow him to walk it out.

"I said to warm up, not power yourself out into oblivion," Gin remarks dryly.

Chuuya breathes out a wheezing huff, his throat dry from dehydration. "I'll still kick your ass if that's what you're worried about."

Judging by Gin's expression, they think he is full of shit. Maybe he is. He's never seen them fight, so he might be in for a surprise. Then again, he knows what he's capable of, how he survived all these years on the streets, and what kind of limits he can push his body to. Maybe they're the one in for a surprise.

Gin takes Chuuya to the sparring area, equipped with mats and a wall full of weapons to choose from that makes his eyes nearly bulge out with happiness. "All these," he murmurs, "just for us?"

Nodding, Gin grabs the bo staff and tosses one of them over to him. "I use these when I train with someone for the first time."

Fair enough. The staff is basically a long, hardwood stick, he thinks to himself as his fingers wrap around it. Even though Chuuya has no doubts that you could land a few serious and painful blows with it, it's by far the safest option for sparring.

"Have you ever used them?"

"One or two times." Back when the sheep mostly stayed in Suribachi city, there was this elderly lady who had used to be a martial artist. She detested their guts, complaining that they were too loud, too troublesome, and too ambitious for a pack of kids in the slums. But she was also bored and ended up, more or less, trying to teach them some 'decent' fighting skills instead of the wild, unmannered fighting that they had to show for. That was the first and only time Chuuya ever held a staff. Having his fists and his ability, he never thought he'd actually need it.

"Hold it like — yes, like that." Gin takes a few steps back then, their hand mirroring Chuuya's as it's wrapped high around the staff. "I attack. You block. Good?"

Chuuya has barely finished his nod when they lunge as quick and effortless as a bolt of lightning, with a second hand taking hold of the staff and aiming it straight at him in a vertical line. He steps forward, blocks it. The rattle of wood against wood echoes through the room. Gin curves one arm, tries to go for his middle. Chuuya's upper body bends to stop the blow. They retreat only to strike again, putting so much force behind it this time that Chuuya feels it in his bones when their staffs collide. It's a rapid-fire succession of attacking and countering, attacking and countering, Chuuya's ears ringing with the sounds they make each time.

Gin, on the other hand, is a silent shadow of death on their feet. Their steps are soundless, face solemn, but every movement is clean, precise, and strategic even. While Chuuya in no way lacks stamina or strength, he ties himself into a spiderweb of reckless defensiveness as he blocks their strikes again and again. He uses his intuition, his body, his emotions even, propelling him forward even when his arms get tired, but they use their mind, and it's a deadly advantage. This is a dance, and *Gin* is the one leading it.

Sparring or not, Chuuya's teeth grit, and with the next blow that clatters against his staff, he pushes forward instead, going in for the attack himself. Gin blocks it just as effortlessly as when they're on the offensive. Then they use Chuuya's frustration to knock the staff

entirely out of his hands, and it clatters to the ground a few feet away.

“Oi…” he breathes out, shaking his head. “Rude much?”

“You’re the one who got impatient and changed the rules,” Gin replies. There are few droplets of sweat on their forehead, but they barely show any sign of heaving lungs.

Chuuya grunts under his breath as he goes to pick up his staff again. “Sorry, got a bit too competitive. You’re really good.”

“I had a good teacher.”

“Not Dazai, right?” Chuuya asks and hopes for a confirmation. There have to be limits to a person’s talents. One single man can’t be perf— can’t be *good at every single thing in the world.*

The corner of Gin’s mouth quirks up. “No. But the boss can handle himself in a fight just fine.”

Chuuya’s lips taste like salt and sweat when they flatten into a line. *Of course, he is.* “If you don’t mind me asking,” he starts after taking a few heartfelt gulps of water. “Why do you waste your time playing secretary?”

“...I like my job.”

“But you also like this, don’t you?”

“Who says my job doesn’t involve a little bit of this...” They step back into the starting stance with a glint in their eyes. “... as well?” Chuuya mirrors them and prepares to block whatever might come his way. “The boss’ ways aren’t exactly conventional. I assumed that *you* would have noticed this by now.”

He blinks. There’s something odd about the way Gin says that. A strange pitch in their tone that he has heard somewhere else before.

“Strike or block,” Gin tells him, and their feet snap forward, one knee lifting as they attack.

This time, Chuuya isn’t caught off guard by their speed. He does realize what felt off about their comment, a *you, out of all people* that went unsaid, and he has an idea what they mean with it too because Yuan used the same tone on him yesterday. His chest puffs with the irritated exhale that rumbles out of it.

“I only slept there because my own bed was compromised,” he snaps as he blocks another blow and doubles it down with a strike himself, trying to slip out of his defensive position as fast as possible.

Gin counters that one easily. The second blow is the one that makes their brows furrow ever so slightly, even if only for a single second. “I never said you didn’t,” they shoot back in reply as Chuuya exploits that fleeting moment of surprise for all that it’s worth, aiming for every blind spot that he finds with speed but also brute force.

“You *implied* it.” Saying that he puts them into a defensive position would probably be a slight exaggeration because Gin is obviously more than competent, but that serious expression of theirs does bleed into a short-lived glare at one point, and he takes that as a victory even if he is the one with the butt of the stick pointing at his throat at the end.

“You spend a lot of time with the boss because you work together,” Gin finally says and drops the staff. “*That’s* the only thing I implied. Whatever you meant is only up to you.”

“I didn’t mean anything either,” he says with a huff. “Just clarified it in case you... y’know.”

Gin only squints.

Drawing a breath and releasing it before he speaks, Chuuya throws up his hands. “Whatever. Forget it.”

“You brought it up,” Gin points out dryly.

Chuuya rolls his eyes and channels the licking flames of the slumbering, starved beast inside him into his posture and hands instead.

“And now I’m ending it. Let’s go *again.”*

Chapter 9: Selective Honesty

Chapter Notes

warnings: recreational drug use at the beginning of the chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Remind me again, why do I have to do this?”

“Because we made a deal,” Dazai is all too happy to answer as he lounges on his couch and flips through a book. When Dazai ordered him up here an hour ago, Chuuya assumed he would give him last-minute instruction, not lie around and be annoying while Chuuya fusses with wrinkles on his shirt. “You got Karma, and I got myself a free hour or two.”

Ugh, that’s how long it will last? He’d much rather put a bullet through his head and take a nap instead. It’s not even because of nerves or fear, although he feels his guts clench anxiously now and then as well. It’s the fact that he hates sitting around, discussing things he doesn’t care about with people he’d much rather see on the ground, preferably with his foot on their face.

“You said you’d still technically be there,” Chuuya reminds him. “Don’t you dare take that back now.”

Behind him, Dazai lets out a melodramatic sigh. “Yes, yes, I’ll be in your ear, listening to everything the entire time. Don’t you worry about that, Chuuya darling.”

Fixing his tie, Chuuya scowls. “Then how’s that free time?” Nothing this man says ever makes sense — that’s the only predictable thing about him. If you think you know something, then you’re wrong. Very, very wrong.

“Well, I’ll get to sit back and relax,” Dazai says with a melodic hum. “Kick up my feet. Play with Jiji. I can even make myself a hot cup of cocoa. That’s as free as my time gets.”

Chuuya turns around to shoot him a narrow-eyed glare. “If I have to listen to you *slurping* for two hours, I’ll sabotage that meeting on purpose. That is a promise.”

“Ah, don’t tempt me,” Dazai drawls, the glint in his one eye dripping

so much shameless lechery that Chuuya feels like he has to look away.

“Seriously?” he mutters. “If you hate your job that much, why even do it? Not like you care much about all the dirty money you make.”

“I already promised you. The day you figure that out, I’ll tell you everything else you want to know.”

Puzzled, Chuuya frowns, not remembering any such thing. Except that he does. It was that day in the office, Chuuya shadowing him for the first time, and Dazai going on and on about weaknesses. After Dazai proclaimed the sheep were his weakness, he made Chuuya guess his instead. They got interrupted before they could finish that conversation, though.

“So your weakness has something to do with you being the boss,” Chuuya concludes and takes a glimpse over his shoulder to gauge his reaction.

Dazai traces one long, slender finger over the pages of his book. “Maybe. Maybe not.”

Mysterious bastard.

“You hate the government and want to take over the country one day.”

“Heh.” Dazai’s chuckle is softer than a summer’s breeze. “Politicians are hypocritical, irritating charlatans; you’re not wrong about that. Why would I aim to become one then? That would be even more work than I’ve already got on my hands.”

“Fine,” Chuuya relents, not upset about that wild guess being wrong. “You’re in it for the easily accessible drugs. You’re just a high-functioning addict, aren’t ya?”

“Yes, Chuuya caught me. All of this —” Dazai waves his hand around and then slips it inside the pocket of his slacks to fish out a small ziplock bag that he apparently always carries around with him. “— for this. Game over for me.”

Ignoring his glaring sarcasm, Chuuya huffs out a breath. “See? Addict. You can’t even walk over to your couch without that shit.”

“I’m self-medicating. There’s a difference.”

“And what’s the name of the disease you’re self-medicating, huh?”

“Oh, Chuuya. I don’t think we have enough time to list off all of them now,” Dazai banters back.

Chuuya just sighs, already dragging his eyes away, but it’s too late. Dazai has already noticed the spare second that they lingered on the powder too long. His smirk turns downright predatory. The only thing he’s missing is a pair of fangs and blood trickling down his chin.

“Would *you* like to self-medicate?” Dazai offers innocently like the bastard hadn’t already sniffed that out seconds ago.

Just because Chuuya wants to feel that promising clarity in his head and because he wants that never-ending, animalistic greed for destruction, death, and lust to mellow out again, doesn’t mean that he actually *should*. Doing cocaine for the first time before an important meeting is probably not a good idea. And yet here Dazai is, looking like a gleeful child as he offers Chuuya a taste of his drugs.

“You’re a shitty boss, you know,” Chuuya says in favor of stalling.

“There is a reason why most successful businessmen are cokeheads,” Dazai retorts with a shrug. “It brightens your mind, makes you euphoric and sociable, and if it’s a good product, then there are usually no side effects. Trust me, Chuuya darling, this is good product. If you feel like you want it, there is a reason. Denying you of that would make me a shitty boss, but *I* am excellent.”

The main reason why Chuuya ends up fucking it all to hell and giving in to his urges is only to make the man stop talking. Really. Of course, Dazai doesn’t even need verbal confirmation to know that Chuuya has taken the bait. The slight slumping of his shoulders is more than enough for him to close the book he was reading, position it in front of him and scatter some of the cocaine on top of it. Chuuya sits down on the edge of the bed and watches him fish out a card and a banknote before crushing the heap into even more delicate powder and dragging some of it into a line. It’s thin but relatively long. Not any different from what Chuuya has seen go around. When Dazai’s done, he offers him the rolled-up banknote with a smoldering smile.

“Thanks,” Chuuya mutters as he accepts it. He considers his choice here for a moment before giving himself a mental shrug and leaning down instead. His eyes flutter half-closed as he inhales the powder through one nostril, only blinking open when the line disappears, and his gaze lifts to meet Dazai’s, one eye, pupils so dark and big that they

nearly eclipse the shades of brown around them, calmly watching him. Sniffing loudly, Chuuya sits up again and shakes his head.

“Good?” Dazai asks.

“It’s been, like, one second.”

“You. Are you good?.”

“Oh. I’m fine.” Chuuya hands Dazai the banknote, but Dazai wordlessly presses it back to him, making him roll his eyes and feel like a bit of a crackwhore. Dazai’s crackwhore, to be specific. Ugh. “I don’t need that.”

“Don’t be stupid. People always need money.” When Chuuya only stares back with a flat look, Dazai adds, “Besides, you’re going to a gambling den. You can’t show up without any money.”

Right. Despite Dazai’s nonchalant attitude about it, he did thoroughly prep Chuuya for the meeting. All the information that has been pumped into his brain over the last week swirls around in circles, too much, too big, too important, and yet in time with the rush of cocaine, it settles like dust and takes root.

The Dragon’s Den, that’s the name of one of the finest casinos in Yokohama, possibly in the entire Kanagawa prefecture even, and also the rendezvous place for tonight’s endeavors. That it has ties to the mafia is far from a secret — the sheep were well aware of that and stayed away most of the time. It’s precisely who its loyalties belong to that has always been the more important question, which probably says a lot about the state of the city and how deep its corruption runs nowadays. Although the port mafia is by far the biggest force, especially after Dazai’s ascension, smaller, primarily family-run mafia and Yakuza clans still run about the place, often spreading out from Tokyo and other neighboring cities.

Of course, now Chuuya not only knows to whom the casino’s strings are attached to but also names, sums, and all the illicit contracts that created them. Things that could ruin the place, but also things that Chuuya has to treat as carefully as he would treat unstable explosives. Because if any sensible piece of information whatsoever comes out, Chuuya’s signature will be attached to it in glaring, red signs, and neither he, nor the sheep will ever see the color of the sky again.

The first name that Dazai gave him is —

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“Oe Katsuo,” the voice from the earpiece murmurs softly as a tall, bald man in a tailored-suit strides into the room. Chuuya clears his throat, his signal for Dazai to shut up. He knows his names. That’s by far the easiest part of this charade, and he doesn’t need Dazai’s help for that. Oe Katsuo is the co-founder, chairman, and CEO of the global asset management firm that owns the casino chain. A wheel as big as they come. His weakness: his sister, an ability user that has gone off the radar ever since an accident led to three deaths of her classmates. A sister that Oe Katsuo still sees on the second Tuesday of every month. Despite the forty years, he wears and the bald head, he looks surprisingly young in reality, a puerile gleam in his grey eyes that unnerves Chuuya even as he gives him a polite bow of his head in greeting.

The second one to introduce herself is Nezuko Muroi, fifty years old, president, COO, and generally acting as a partner and consultant to Oe. Her eyes hold none of the same softness, raking over Chuuya with a scrutinizing intensity before deciding to even acknowledge him with a nod. According to Dazai, she is a financial sadist, using money to assert power and play games. Though not exactly uncommon, she can, and she will ruin you to pieces if she feels like it.

Last but not least is the oldest of them, yet also the one who seems the most harmless of all: Ouki Tomura, holds shares to the casino and is a dirty cop. That’s it. His smirk is kind of slimy. Teeth yellow. Chuuya has a feeling he’d smell cheap liquor, beer, and cigarettes if he came too close.

And then there is Chuuya, dressed in mafia colors, expensive materials, and one specifically tailored mask that Dazai created just for him and just for tonight. A young, brash executive who rose through the ranks with skills and speed after joining the mafia. They don’t know that Chuuya is Dazai’s *husband* because they don’t even know Dazai’s name, let alone his relationship status. Outside of the tower, his entire persona is shrouded in mist and rumors, the only thing that’s anyone actually knows is that the boss is powerful and that he is a beast. That’s it.

Maybe that’s why there are no snide remarks or sneers about his age when this meeting begins, not like anything Chuuya had to hear from Ace or other Mafiosi. He can see it in their eyes, of course; the surprise to have someone so seemingly immature sitting across from them, the immediate assumptions that follow, and the mild flash of scorn here

and there, but all of that remains behind closed doors. Just private thoughts. Nothing to actually upset the man that the boss of the port mafia personally sent as his replacement.

“Apologies, but the boss couldn’t make it,” Chuuya drawls, leaning back in his seat. “He had urgent matters to attend do.”

“We hope the sir is well?” Oe Katsuo inquires softly.

Chuuya offers him a half-shrug. “The boss is fine. Very busy these days.”

“That’s hardly surprising what with all those controversies going around lately. There is only so much time before the situation on the streets come to a head,” Nezuko remarks, meaning the increasing voices uttering themselves against ability-users and in favor of extreme laws regulating them. Somehow, in the end, it always is about that. “Where exactly is your organization positioned in all of that, Nakahara-kun?”

Chuuya hears Dazai hum in his ear but does not offer anything. They’ve been through this. After all, it’s one of the main reasons why he is even sitting here right now. “The port mafia is positioned where it’s always been. We protect those who are loyal to us. The rest doesn’t matter.”

Her brows raise. “You don’t think a bit of political distance right now would be wiser?”

“You want us to distance ourselves from the very people who have been protecting your business for the last twelve months?”

“You can find protection everywhere with the right price. Surely, you must understand how worrisome this kind of alliance can be in times like these, especially when there are more than enough other organizations willing to offer the same service, and for a better deal, none of whom employ people that could be persecuted at any given moment.”

“Now, we don’t want to be too hasty,” Oe Katsuo cuts in before his partner can drive the discussion off a cliff. “The current political climate raises all kinds of questions for this partnership, but I’m sure your boss has solutions to protect both of our businesses in the meantime. Right?”

Ouki Tomura chooses that moment to slap his glass of water on the

table and insert himself into the conversation. “No amount of schemes will be able to stop what’s coming and what’s coming is this: folks are tired of getting the run-around from those ability-freaks, and the government is finally starting to listen to ‘em. Y’all either cut your losses or go down with them. But I’m not planning to let you take my money while you’re at it.”

Oe Katsuo rubs his forehead. Nezuko Muroi agrees with a firm nod.

“Well, if you want to withdraw from the partnership, why not just say so?” Chuuya prompts brazenly, barely suppressing to roll his eyes so hard they do a backflip. “I already told you, we’re busy. Stop wasting our damn time by talking around the subject.”

On the other end, he hears Dazai chuckle.

“Look, young man,” Nezuko Muroi starts, “you might have not learned this yet, but we’re entitled to demand a safety net. You come at high prices. That’s the least we can expect in return.”

It’s not like the port mafia has loaned them a bunch of money to start the casino chains, protection, and services to begin with — no, the only thing they see is the fear of what they might not get.

“The safety net you want is right in front of you already. You might have forgotten it, but the port mafia knows how to operate in the shadows. That’s what they do. And that’s what you came for to us in the first place.” Chuuya only notices the slip of his tongue when it’s too late. He said *they*. Not *we*. He waits for a reprimanding comment from Dazai, but it never comes. Later, probably.

“That’s because we been letting the ability users run loose for too long,” Ouki Tomura huffs, “but that’s about to come to an end. Weren’t ya listening, boy?”

Ah, and finally, all the actual opinions are starting to come to the surface.

“We have ties to every single branch of the government. Half of the people making the laws are loyal to us. This casino’s business is illegal. So you seriously think a few loud voices and a party will stop us?”

“Good,” Dazai’s quiet but soft voice suddenly praises. Chuuya feels his stomach flutter for some reason.

“There is a major difference between people and illegal goods, Nakahara-kun. Goods are objects. *They* don’t do anything. People, however, are unpredictable creatures, and forgive me for not putting my blind trust into a bunch of hooligans.”

Chuuya cocks his head. “And yet you clearly treat them the same.”

“Oh, honey, I don’t treat them like anything. What matters me to is making sure our business is in safe hands, and at the moment, you’re not making it feel that way.”

Weakness, it thrills through Chuuya’s head like an alarm signal. *Use their weakness against them.*

“What do you think will happen when people with abilities start being treated like criminals?” Chuuya asks into the round even though he shifts his body in the direction of Oe Kotsuo. Just a bit. “That people will just turn themselves in? Give up their life? No way. They’ll either run or fight back. Who do you think will they turn to then, hah?” Finally, the faces looking back at their start frowning for a very different reason. “The port mafia protects their followers. This will only drive more people to us, and that —” He shrugs. “— is the opposite of a problem for business.”

Nezuko Muroi folds her arms over her chest, still not entirely convinced but apparently out of arguments. A financial sadist, Dazai told him. Although the port mafia has been good to her, she wants more. She wants control. She wants people to bleed for her — not bleed for people. And working with the mafia is probably driving her all kinds of insane.

She should fucking join the mafia then, Chuuya thinks dryly.

Ouki Tomura has only been in it for the money anyway, and now that he more or less knows that he’s not going to lose any of it, he is going with the flow.

But Oe Katsuo —

“I can basically imagine how Oe-Kun must be looking at you right now,” Dazai murmurs. “I bet like you’re his knight in shining armor.”

A snort slips out of Chuuya before he muffles it with a cough.

“Nakahara-kun is right,” the man in question says. “If anything, this is a profitable situation that we should use.”

“While he has a point, there are still several adjustments and propositions we need to discuss,” Nezuko Muroi butts in. “Let’s take a break before we do that.”

Chuuya’s chest sags with a soundless breath of relief. It’s not over yet; lawyers and bookmakers are about to be added into this round, but as far as Chuuya’s part in this goes, he has done his job. He reassured them. He convinced them to stay. No affiliates were lost. The two men that came with him will take care of the rest, and Chuuya will just have to sit there, pretend like he’s listening, and only step in if they demand anything too outrageous. Easy.

There’s a buffet with snacks, pastries, coffee, tea, and drinks set up on a table against the wall, and Chuuya gets up to make use of it, not feeling like cooking later. Funnily enough, Oe Katsuo chooses to do the same. His gaze flickers to Chuuya a few times. Feeling whimsical, Chuuya lets his plate float in the air as he loads it with food. Such a small party trick, yet Oe Katsuo’s eyes grow huge.

“I deeply apologize for anything that my partners said that might have offended you,” he says and gives Chuuya a bow.

Chuuya doesn’t snort, but he breathes out a slight puff before smirking nonchalantly. “It’s fine. All is good in the end, right?”

“Yes, I suppose it is,” Oe Katsuo murmurs, his plate still frozen in his hands. He pauses. “How open exactly are you to new members?”

Schooling his expression, Chuuya focuses on the food instead of laughing like a maniac. It’s so easy. Dangling something in front of people and then watching them reach for it like it was their own idea is so easy. And the worst thing is that it feels insanely, crushingly good. It feels like another line of cocaine. A dirty thrill that pumps through his blood and makes his stomach curl.

“I was biding my time on the street just a while ago, and trust me, I wasn’t a fan of the port mafia,” Chuuya admits. “Now I’m here. I’d say we’re pretty open as long as we can trust someone.” Of course, the entire truth looks a bit different, but that’s not what Oe Katsuo wants or needs to hear right now. He needs reassurance that his sister will be protected and sheltered if the worst comes to worst. Chuuya gives him that.

“Why?” he asks then. “Thinking of switching careers?”

Oe Katsuo chuckles softly under his breath. “I’m afraid not, Nakahara-

kun. I'm simply thinking about what you said. There's much that can be achieved with so many influential people that feel indebted to you." His gaze meets Chuuya's. "You could overthrow an entire empire. Or build one."

Smirking, Chuuya turns to lean against the table and dig his chopsticks into the salad on his plate. "I'd say my boss already did that."

"Right," Oe Katsuo replies after a lingering moment. "Your boss… he certainly did."

"But you've not done so bad for yourself, huh?"

"I guess you could say that."

Chuuya hums. "Humble. I like that in a man."

There's an amused breath in his earpiece — or, maybe there isn't, and Chuuya is imagining things since he isn't really sure what kind of direction he's taking right now either. His job here is done. There is no need to convince Oe Katsuo any further, let alone flirt with him, but somehow the knowledge that he can and that he could and that if he did, this successful, clever, wealthy (and old) man would most likely follow his lead and let him spin in circles is intoxicating. It makes him want to do it just because.

Before he can, the door opens, and the port mafia's lawyer and bookmaker come in, stopping Chuuya before he can hurl himself off a cliff in his desire to feel good. To feel *powerful.* Maybe he's just as bad as Nezuko Muroi.

"Back to the gritty stuff then," Oe Katsuo says, and his voice droops with mild disappointment. Chuuya smiles when he heads back to the table.

The next hour is far less exciting. Chuuya listens to lawyers and accountants go back and forth between numbers and percentages and whatnot, only humming occasionally to give his consent or adding a "that's right" or a "that will work" here and there.

Now he is no expert at these things, finance, sales, profit, but he isn't an idiot either. The changes and offers their affiliates make seem a tad… audacious, especially when doing business with the port mafia. However, it's disguised with so much casualness that it almost goes under.

Chuuya nearly opens his mouth several times before reminding himself that he shouldn't stick his head into financial matters when he can't even *read* most of the things written in those contracts. Not yet anyway. Besides, Dazai assured him that it's not his problem to deal with — how could it be? Not to mention that he's listening to this entire thing and hasn't raised a single objection whatsoever. At one point, Chuuya fears Dazai fell asleep, but the noise of a shuffling sound or a sneeze — that should *not* make him bite his cheek with all his might to stop himself from breaking out in a stupid grin — convince him otherwise. Dazai is listening to everything, and he doesn't seem to have any problem with it.

In any case, Chuuya should be glad. The port mafia losing a battle, even if it's about a few million yen, is a good thing, a win for Chuuya and the sheep and the invisible war that they have been fighting… with mixed results so far.

Once everything is done, signatures given, contracts sealed, friendly goodbyes exchanged, and the two black-clad mafiosi that escorted Chuuya to *the Dragon's den* come to pick him up again, Oe Katsuo gives him another bow and says, "it was a pleasure doing business with you, Nakahara-kun. I hope we will see each other again soon."

"Likewise," Chuuya's smile is less sharp now that most of the adrenaline is starting to wear off. "I'm sure we will."

There's something odd about how Oe Katsuo's mouth twitches at that, but he gives him another nod and walks away before Chuuya can even try to understand it.

Dazai only speaks again when Chuuya finally collapses in the backseat of the car. (How exactly he knows that he's alone now, Chuuya can only dream of finding out.) "Now that was quite a show you put on there."

The engine of the car comes alive with a deep purr. Making an indecipherable grunt in the back of his throat, Chuuya rests his head against the headrest and lets his eyes flutter closed. "It's what you wanted."

Dazai hums. "It was. Find me once you feel sociable again. There's a bottle of wine with your name waiting for you."

"It's barely noon."

"Well, you don't have to *drink* it."

“Uh-uh,” Chuuya says. “You just want to turn me into an addict as well.”

“It’s a reward, Chuuya darling. Most people would say thank you.” And then Dazai promptly cuts himself off, not even giving Chuuya the chance to snap that he’s not a damn dog doing tricks.

In any case, Chuuya was only holding up his end of the deal he made in exchange for forgetting Karma out of Ace’s grasp. So what exactly is the reward for?

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In the end, Chuuya does drink no matter what time it is right now. Not being sober when he’s around Dazai is so much easier, he has concluded over the last week. He can focus on the warm rush of delicious wine sloshing down his throat instead of all the questions he’d like to utter, or the way Dazai always looks so focused, yet so content while he is watching him take a few sips with his cheek in his palm, or the flames of that thing guttering over and over and —

“Can I ask you something?”

“Always,” Dazai replies.

Chuuya places his glass back on the desk and glances at the pile of documents he delivered when he came here. “Is the port mafia always so foolishly generous with their affiliates, or did we just get an awful end of the deal?”

“Oh, that.” Grabbing the documents, Dazai spares them one single glance before shoving them aside. “Yes, they pretty much ripped us off.”

“Hah? But our men — the accountant — you! Why didn’t *you* say anything?” The longer he thinks about it, though, the more he realizes that there is no way in hell Dazai would anything happen just like that; it’s why Chuuya was so bothered by it in the first place. “You wanted them to do that,” he concludes out loud. “Why would you want that? They’re not that important, are they?”

“Everyone contributes in some way or another, so they are important, yes, but they have also been terribly nervous and planning to cut ties with us on some fronts for a while now. It was only a matter of choosing the right time to let them do it.”

Chuuya's finger taps against his glass. "Go on?"

Dazai smiles coyly before speaking. "Tomorrow at this time, Oe Katsuo and a few other members of his company will get arrested for snowballing their investors. Financial fraud. Their stocks, including the casino, will hit an all-time low, and they will lose more money than they made in the last six months." The curve around his mouth gets sharper. "And the loss we will suffer from it will be minimal, at worst."

"Financial fraud," Chuuya repeats slowly. "Isn't working with the mafia already fraud?"

"It's illegal but not fraud, not really. Oe Katsuo has had debts for a while now — part of the reason why they turned to us, yes, but not even we could help him out of the hole he dug himself."

Suddenly Chuuya's comment about his empire seems insensitive. He scratches his forehead. "So all of it was part of the plan? And my role was to, what, get scammed by them?" So much for an excellent job. His only good job was being stupid, apparently.

"Your job was to reassure them to stay, but also to make them underestimate you enough to be cheap, and you executed it perfectly."

"That's not really helping."

"Because of you, our relationship isn't damaged, which means that they will come back, begging us for another loan and most likely a lawyer to get them out of prison. Because of you, Chuuya, they will accept any terms we make, and the money that we normally make through them will be doubled."

Chuuya shoots him a glare over the rim of his glass. "I could have done all of that if you had told me too, you know."

"But you believed what you were saying and doing, and that made them believe you too without getting suspicious." Dazai leans back in his chair with a shrug. "Selective honesty is the best option in this world. Tell too many lies, and you'll get caught up in them one day. Reveal too many truths, and you'll find yourself stabbed in the back by tomorrow. But a sincerity here and there? They'll never see anything coming." When Chuuya only clicks his tongue in annoyance, Dazai adds, "don't give me that look. You did the same thing with Oe Katsuo."

Chuuya's lips press into a thin line.

"Yes, Chuuya," Dazai all but purrs as he leans forward with his elbows, "I could smell the flirting from all the way here. You used selective honesty to make yourself and the port mafia seem more human. I used you to make the whole deal feel more authentic. We do what we have to do, right?"

"Right," Chuuya mutters only to get him to shut up.

Except, of course, he doesn't.

"But in the end, Oe Katsuo used you just the same. You both used each other."

"He used me?" Chuuya echoes. "I — I'm young and objectively handsome, so yes, I used that to soften him up a little. What could *he* possibly have to offer me?"

"All kinds of things depending on what you like," Dazai answers seriously. "Maybe you're into older people. Or bald people. Or people who have a soft touch for ability users. Or —"

"Okay, I get it," Chuuya mutters, rolling his eyes.

"Do you?"

"Yeah, I get that everything from start to finish is planned and engineered by you. It's your play, and everyone else is just a performer. Right?" Despite the evident bitterness in his tone, there's a note of awe buried in his voice, too. Dazai's ability to see things early in advance and arrange them in such a way that everything happens just like *he* wants them to is terrifying. Dehumanizing when you end up playing a puppet — and you always do. But it's also fascinating.

"The entire world is a giant scheming court, and we're all trapped inside it, Chuuya. Not playing doesn't make you different or better or good. It just makes you defenseless against the people who do, and rest assured, most people do. Deception and masquerade are what distinguish us from animals. It's what makes us human." Dazai's eye drags over Chuuya, and his lips curve into a heated smile then. "But you already know that. And you *liked* doing it, didn't you?"

"I don't —" Cutting himself off, he considers his options here. Denying it, especially with Dazai, is always his first instinct, but maybe, just maybe, he should take his own advice and confess a truth for once.

What did Dazai call it? Selective honesty. “Back there, when I used Oe Katsuo’s sister to… “ He frowns. “... woo him into staying, I guess, I liked it, yeah. It felt good.” Really, really good.

The smirk Dazai shoots him is sharper than a blade before he leans back and half-shrugs. “Self-aware. I like that in a man.”

That small moment of honesty evaporates into mist, and Chuuya flips him off. “I hope you choke.”

“And so eloquent ~”

“You done?”

Dazai lets his goofy ass grin linger for another moment before schooling it into something more neutral, taking a sip of the wine instead.

Chuuya drums his fingers against the desk. “I get what you did and why you did it, but is that all I’m going to be from now on, the dense low-life people can rip off?” Because as practical as it, there’s little thing called pride, and Chuuya isn’t entirely unaffected by it. If he is going to play in this… scheming court, as Dazai said, he doesn’t want to do it like this.

“Today, they thought they could play games with you. Tomorrow you will be the person to grant them a loan that will save them from complete ruin when they come crawling back to us on their knees. They will remember you for years to come.” Dazai’s head tips back, one eye falling closed. “Your role will be so much larger than this.”

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“— and he basically knew what was going to happen already weeks ago. Hell, maybe even *months*. He knows everything. Every little detail is planned out. All of it.”

Filling his bottle with water from the suspender, Shirase hums, not even pretending to listen. Yuan at least raises her brows. “What exactly are you saying?”

Chuuya rubs his temple. “I’m saying that going up against someone like Dazai in a game of wits is probably not the smartest choice. I’m pretty sure he already knows that we never actually intended to simply accept the deal and stay here for the rest of our lives. He probably knows that we’re having this exact conversation right now.”

“So…” Yuan frowns. “Then what?”

A few feet away, a ringing clash comes from the two people who have been sparring. Chuuya drags his gaze away from them and back to his two friends that he’s been updating on the latest events for the last five minutes. He makes sure to lower his voice when he speaks. “So we should probably focus on finding out why we are still alive despite all of that. Come up with something better in the meantime.”

Shirase snorts under his breath, and Chuuya’s eyes snap to him. He’s been acting weird ever since Chuuya dragged half of the sheep to the gym. “What?”

“Nothing.”

Yuan clears her throat. “No offense, but how are we supposed to do that? You’re the only one who talks to that man.”

“I’m working on it,” Chuuya says because she isn’t wrong. The only one who probably has the answer to that question is Dazai himself — and to get the answer, Chuuya only needs to figure out *his* weakness first. Dazai promised he’d get the answers then. Easy, right? Totally easy. His chest sags with a heavy sigh.

“What’s stopping us from just running away?” Shirase asks in a quiet but clearly annoyed murmur.

“Have you listened to a word I said?”

“The boss would figure out what we’re planning before we could even try to pull it off,” Yuan summarizes.

Shirase huffs out a dry breath. “The guy is super smart blah blah, so what? Do you really think he would care if a bunch of people he has no use for anyway disappear?”

“You really want to spend the rest of your life being on the run?” Chuuya asks.

“They don’t care about us! They’d probably be even happy to see us go except maybe —” Shirase comes to a spluttering stop and curses softly. “I really doubt anyone would try to stop us from leaving.”

Chuuya’s eyes narrow. “What were you going to say?”

“Nothing,” Shirase mutters.

“Spit it out, Shirase.”

“*You* spit it out! I said nothing, so I mean nothing.”

After another moment of trying and failing to stare him down, Chuuya rolls his eyes and lets it go. “Fine. Whatever. The people here might not give a fuck about you personally, but they will start giving a fuck when you take highly sensitive information with you, so no, I don’t think running away is as easy as you make it sound.”

“So we do nothing instead. Great. Love that.”

“I’ll take doing nothing for now over looking over my shoulder for the next ten years thinking that they finally caught up,” Yuan whisper-hisses. “Do you have any idea what these people are capable of if you piss them off?”

“Obviously,” he whisper-snaps backs. “That’s why I want to fucking leave!”

Yuan’s eyes twitch in frustration. “What do you think are we trying to do here?”

“You tell me because it looks like a whole shit ton of nothing!”

“Then *you* suggest something!”

“I *just* did!”

“Well, that was a shit suggestion!”

“I haven’t heard you suggest anything better either!”

“I’m trying. I’m blending in, I’m being useful, I’m getting worked to the bone by that Kouyou woman. I’m trying, and so is Chuuya, and all *you* do is complain!”

“Guys, calm down,” Chuuya cuts in before they start a fucking brawl right here and now — something that has happened before. Yuan and Shirase can go at it for hours over the smallest, most insignificant things, but at the end of the day, they’d still kill for each other. This is one of those situations where he needs them to kill for each other, not fight like children. “Shirase’s not entirely wrong: right now we can do nothing, and I know it’s frustrating because I said we would fight back, but Yuan is right, too. One wrong move, and we could lose everything. It’s just better to be careful and take our time than rush in

like fucking idiots."

"I'm off," Yuan declares, irritation written into every line of her face. "I actually want to work out and not waste my time listening to your useless whining."

Chuuya watches her strut away before glancing back at Shirase, who shoves his hands in the pocket of his sweatpants and aimlessly kicks the floor under his feet. "Someone had a bad day."

"You think?"

"Whatever. I'm not the one you should be worried about anyway. Luca's on the warpath now more than ever. He's pissed."

"What's his fucking problem when he's the one going around spreading bullshit and breaking into apartments to throw parties," Chuuya mutters as he picks up his bottle and starts a sluggish pace through the gym before anyone decides to listen in on their conversation. There aren't that many people here but you can never be too careful. "Speaking of which, thank you for cleaning up before you left." He bumps Shirase's shoulders. "That was cool of you guys."

"Yeah, uh," scratching the back of his neck, Shirase has that odd look on his face again, "it was… the least we could do, I guess. But Luca — he just really hates this, you know. The port mafia thing."

"That's not the only thing he hates."

"You should talk to him before he does something stupid."

Chuuya snorts. "Yeah, not happening."

"I'm serious, dude. He's got it into his head to single-handedly get us out of here at, like, any costs. And when I say any, I mean *any."*

"What exactly is that idiot planning to do?"

"Why are you asking me?!"

"Obviously you know something, or you wouldn't even be talking about this," Chuuya says, "so?"

"I don't know. I swear!" Shirase insists and holds up his hands. "I find something else to do whenever he goes off on one of his rants. I can't listen to that crap. I mean I don't like it here either, but he has lost his mind."

Coming from Shirase, who is actually a pretty decent listener, that must mean something.

“I guess I can try to…” Chuuya slowly trails off when his gaze slides past Shirase to the sparring area and the two people who have just arrived there. One of them is Gin. The other one…

Shirase turns his head to see what has got him so occupied. “Is that —?”

“Dazai,” Chuuya finishes and somehow manages to tear his eyes away, “yeah.”

“Shit, dude. You were right about him knowing everything.”

Chuuya lets out a nervous laugh. He doesn’t understand why he suddenly feels so flustered all of a sudden. He sees Dazai too often to feel intimidated by his presence anymore. It’s just weird seeing him when he’s with his own friends. Strange to stand on the opposite ends of the gym. (And odd to see Dazai *work out.* Not in his usual business attire. But in a simple white shirt. And grey sweatpants. And —)

“He’s just sparring with Gin,” Chuuya explains, scratching his head. “I think.”

Shirase narrows his eyes.

Chuuya blinks. “What?”

“*Nothing.* Did you actually want us to work out, or was it just a cover to talk?”

“Work out. I wanted us to spar, but on second thought, we should try out a few of the training exercises first.”

He steers Shirase in the other direction and as far away as possible. For no reason at all.

For the next thirty minutes, Chuuya throws himself into every exercise and machine, refusing to get himself distracted by anything and —

Well, if his eyes sometimes lift and accidentally fall on Dazai and Gin sparring, Dazai’s fluid strikes and blocks with a knife too fucking perfect and graceful and effortless even from the distance, then it’s not Chuuya’s fault. Knowing your enemy’s fighting style is very important. And he always catches himself before his staring becomes too obvious.

His luck runs out when he's practicing throwing knives, trying out different techniques and grasps. Chuuya *feels* him before he even hears his voice, a violently distinct presence right behind him like the sensation of lips hovering over skin.

"I heard that your aim gets better when you imagine the person you hate most on the other end."

The fingers that are wrapped around the hilt of his knife pause.

"Whose face do you see, Chuuya?"

A savage breath rushes out of him when he throws it. The knife lands dead center. Dazai hums.

"It will be yours if you sneak up on me like that again," Chuuya says and turns around, only to find himself way too close to the man. He swallows but doesn't step back either, lest Dazai senses blood. "What do you want?"

Dazai's smile is slow but dangerous. "Can I not just watch Chuuya throw knives? He is very good at it. Must be someone he really, really wants to see dead."

Chuuya casts a tentative glance a few feet away where Shirase has been making himself accustomed to spears, then he grabs another knife. "Why not volunteer as the target then? Better view, you know."

"You're funny. I like that in a man."

"And you're standing in my way."

"Actually, I'm next to you. You have more than enough space to do as you please."

"Your *presence* is in my way," Chuuya mutters. "Stop distracting me."

"Oh, Chuuya thinks I'm distracting?"

Chuuya's hand curls around the knife. He is *this* close to taking it and stabbing Dazai with it.

"Fine, fine," Dazai finally relents, taking an entire step back. "I did come here with a purpose other than harassing you, actually."

After another, more or less, good shot, Chuuya shoots Dazai an unimpressed stare. "Did you now?"

Dazai nods enthusiastically. “Yes! I was wondering if Chuuya would grant me the honor of sparring with him.”

Now that has Chuuya actually freezing. Even if he makes sure to shake it off as quickly as possible. “Sparring?” he repeats dumbly. “With you?”

“Yes, with me, and with you.”

“Why?”

“Pardon me?”

“You were just sparring with Gin, I mean.”

“Ah, so you did see me. How rude of you not to even say hello to your husband.”

Knowing that Shirase probably hears half of the shit Dazai says makes Chuuya wants to dig a hole and bury himself there. He settles on letting out a frustrated breath instead. “You were occupied. Shut up.”

“I will shut up when I get an answer.”

Either Chuuya says yes and half of the sheep will probably see him, see *them*, or Chuuya says no and comes off like a coward who is too scared to go against the boss. Whatever he chooses, he’ll probably end up regretting it later. However, the thing is… he actually wants one of these options, stupidly so, feels his stomach flip-flop with near violent excitement at the mere thought.

To let out his frustration, he throws another knife. And again. It doesn’t make him feel any better.

Dazai looks as patient as ever when Chuuya finally turns to him and crosses his arms, feeling like he’s already making a mistake before he even says the words. *“Fine.”*

“Wonderful,” Dazai all but purrs. “Follow me.”

As Chuuya presses his lips together and follows him, he has the distinct feeling of walking to his execution, not because he thinks Dazai will kill him, but because the sheep that are here to witness this entire thing will. They’ve known that he’s working the boss for a while now, but they’ve never actually seen him do it. And Chuuya came here with *them,* as *theirs,* not with Dazai. So accepting his

invitation feels a little like betraying his friends.

If Dazai notices his mood, he makes no comment about it.

“I heard you trained with Gin the other day.”

Keeping his gaze trained on the sparring area only, Chuuya huffs. “Yeah, they kicked my ass.”

“They like to do that. Don’t ever let their quiet exterior fool you. There’s a bloodthirsty sadist hiding behind it.”

“Is that why you chose them as your secretary?”

Dazai hums as they reach the sparring area. “Among other things.”

“Okay,” Chuuya says and raises his brows when looking at him. “How do you want to do this?”

“I was thinking hand-to-hand combat,” Dazai answers, bringing one arm across his chest and pushing his elbow to stretch his shoulder. “Slap me, choke me, bite me, pull whatever dirty trick you have up your sleeves. All is fair in… war.”

Chuuya cracks his knuckles. “What, even abilities?”

“If you need it, sure.”

Now that’s just bait. There’s no way in hell that Dazai is going to reveal his ability, assuming he has one, in front of an audience after keeping it concealed for so long. But Chuuya doubts that there will be need for it anyway.

“Guess we’ll see,” he drawls.

“I guess we —”

Just like Gin didn’t bother waiting to attack with him, Chuuya doesn’t waste a single second either, immediately going on the offense with a punch. As if he’s known this was about to happen ten minutes ago, Dazai neatly moves his head out of the way, stepping back as he does. And again. And again. So light on his feet, he looks like he’s dancing. Chuuya memorizes his rhythm and switches *his* instead, his fist aiming for the space that Dazai should slither into now. Instead, Dazai blocks him this time with his fingers around Chuuya’s wrist and lands the first blow.

He feels the air squeeze out of his lungs. It *hurts*. It does. But pain is only a reaction. Pain signals that what you're doing is wrong. Pain sharpens your sense, makes you think twice about your next strike, and teaches you a lesson. Pain makes you better.

Chuuya's savage grin never wavers as he reaches out with his fist, drop-kicks Dazai in the stomach, and watches him fly back from the force of it. "You call that a punch?" he asks, shoving his hands into the pockets of his sweatpants. "Feels more like a massage, if you ask me."

Bracing himself on his elbows, Dazai only smirks, though. "If Chuuya wants a massage, he just has to ask for it. I've been told my hands are very talented."

"Get up," Chuuya says, ignoring the bullshit that comes out of his mouth. "And actually do something useful with them."

"Massages are beneficial, especially for —" Dazai dances back again but follows it up with a kick at Chuuya's knees, missing them by a breath. "— for tense people like you."

Chuuya laughs loudly, shifts position to cross his feet. Spinning on his left one, the right one comes up and connects with Dazai's jaw with a *crack* that reverberates through both of them. Dazai reels back, gasping for air. Completely exposed. Whether it's real or just another stupid play, Chuuya has no time to think about it. He flings himself forward and aims for every open spot of attack he sees. A side kick with to his cheek. A front kick to his chin. As soon as he recovers, his other leg extends and targets Dazai's peroneal nerve in his thigh, making him fall on the mat, and Chuuya's left hand grabs him by the throat as he swings out the knife he pocketed earlier and goes in for the death-kill.

It never connects, of course. The sharp blade of the knife glints as it hovers a millimeter above Dazai's bandaged neck. *So close.* But Chuuya never draws blood even if Dazai makes it hard not to. He's pinned to the ground, his pale skin bruised, lips chapped and bloody, a breath away from losing his life in front of subordinates and enemies alike, and yet he looks pleased as he gazes up at Chuuya kneeling above him, his one visible eye oozing heat. A breathing nightmare in the shape of the most infuriatingly handsome face he's ever had to deal with.

"Go ahead, Chuuya." It's a soft drag of murmured words. "Kiss me if

you want.”

Chuuya’s eyes fly open, his hand loosening around Dazai’s neck because that’s not —

The bastard kicks out his thigh and reverses their positions within the blink of an eye. The knife gets slapped out of Chuuya’s hand. Both his arms get pinned to the mat next to his head. Dazai looms above him, his shin bracketing Chuuya’s legs to keep him from kicking out. A predatory smirk dances on his lips.

But instead of the sardonic remark that Chuuya prepares himself for, Dazai tips his gaze upwards and clicks his tongue. “Easy, boys. Just a sparring match between friends.” Chuuya blinks; he didn’t even notice that some of the mafiosi had drawn weapons and aimed them at him. Probably because of the knife. Dazai’s eye travels back down to meet Chuuya’s. “Isn’t that right?”

“Sure,” Chuuya hisses through clenched teeth, “if that makes you feel better.”

Dazai is so close Chuuya can feel his quiet chuckle fan against his cheek, even more, so his distinct smell that Chuuya didn’t even realize he had memorized until the scent of sandalwood and cedar and his cologne mixed with sweat rolls over him in a familiar, heady wave. The way Dazai drags his gaze over Chuuya with so much weight and intent, undressing him with one eye alone, only makes Chuuya spiral harder, his heart slamming a wild beat inside his ribcage until he feels dizzy with it.

“Don’t worry. I can teach you how to stop falling for emotional taunts, and then… then you will be invincible.”

His mouth is dry when he swallows the knot in his throat and forces himself to relax, to stop struggling against Dazai’s hold — because apparently there are muscles under the bandages — and go pliant and soft instead. “Really?” He feels Dazai’s thumb stroke over the skin on his wrist, eliciting a breathless shiver. “You’ll teach me?”

Dazai’s eye narrows ever so slightly, but he doesn’t tighten the grip again. “If you want to.”

“Yeah.” Chuuya’s chest is heavily rising and falling with each breath. “I want to.” And as soon as the last word leaves his lips, he moves.

In Dazai’s defense, he is prepared for *something* — it’s just that he

anticipates Chuuya to go for his face, his chest maybe, not to kick him in the nuts. Watching Dazai crumple to the ground, Chuuya feels the phantom ache himself, almost enough to make him feel bad about it, but not quite. Instead, he rolls away, jumps to his feet, and grabs Dazai's hair. Yanking it back, he leans down with a sickly sweet smile. "Maybe you should take a few lessons yourself."

Chuuya in no way goes easy on him, his grip on his hair has to sting, but somehow Dazai still manages to wheeze out a breathless laugh. "Maybe… maybe we both need them."

Shaking his head, Chuuya lets go and lets him drop back on the mat. As he does, he realizes several things:

One: back when Dazai was pinning him down to the ground, he could have used for *the tainted sorrow* to push him away at any given point.

Two: He *liked* being pinned. Or, maybe he liked *Dazai* pinning him. Whatever it was, he liked it. He really did.

Three: his friends witnessed everything. All of it.

Chapter End Notes

I don't fuck around when I say slow-burn

next chapter you can expect: a dream, a distraction, and a certain organization's cameo :)

Chapter 10: Fatal Attraction

Chapter Notes

> Warnings: homoerotic tension and death of irrelevant background characters. (It's somewhat graphic. Towards the end of the chapter.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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"Yeah." Chuuya's chest is heavily rising and falling with each breath. "I want to." And as soon as the last word leaves his lips, he moves. All it takes to cross the distance between them is to lift his chin ever so slightly and brush his mouth against Dazai's. It's not a kiss, not when their lips touch but don't linger. But it is an invitation. And Dazai seems all too happy to accept it.

He catches Chuuya's bottom lip and actually kisses him this time, slowly at first, one shared breath dragging on for an eternity that never plans to end, then with a fever and an urgency that's infectious, bleeding over into Chuuya and making his head spin with it. Hands are still pinning him to the ground, the places where their skin touches burning and forcing him to just take it. Chuuya does. He takes every dizzying slam of his heart, every exhale, and every bruising slide of lips, and he lets them set his soul ablaze, surging into every kiss like a drug addict trying to get his next fix.

Dazai's head tilts, and the change of angle adds a heated, toe-curling edge to it, dragging out a ragged noise from the back of Chuuya's throat that makes his lips part. The fingers around his wrist curl tighter. Chuuya's stomach bottoms out, almost painful in its intensity, and then it flutters some more when Dazai gives him a tease of his tongue.

"Chuuya."

Gasping breathlessly, Chuuya arches into him, his legs curving around the thighs that were pinning him down just now. Above him, Dazai gets heavier. His weight presses down and molds their bodies together until Chuuya feels possessed underneath him. Until he feels like he can lean into the things that feel good and just let go without having to worry about the consequences because he knows Dazai will catch him.

"*Chuuya."*

With a heaving chest, Chuuya draws back. Confused, because there is someone saying his name and he doesn't understand where it's coming from. He glances around looking for it but instead of finding the source of the voice, he sees something else. His friends. His family.

The sheep. Yuan. Shirase. Luca. And they are all staring at him, the disappointment glaringly obvious in their eyes.

He goes rigid with shame.

They *saw* him. They all saw him and what he did. And the worst thing is that for a few minutes, Chuuya forgot; he completely forgot about his promise to them, about what he's supposed to do, about Dazai and what he did to them.

He just forgot.

And now they know.

"Chuuya!"

His head snaps to the side, trying to find who the fuck is calling him and —

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The sensation of shockingly cold fingers makes him jerk awake.

"Chuuya is even trying to punch me in his sleep. How typical."

His eyes fly open to the sight of Dazai, sitting on the edge of his bed and gripping his wrist with an amused grin on his face.

"Ah, there you go. Finally. Good morning sleeping beauty."

"Wha —" Chuuya blinks furiously and suddenly realizes that Dazai is here, in his bedroom, while he was sleeping and having a dream about — about…

An undignified noise rips out of the back of his throat as he yanks himself out of Dazai's grasp and scoots back on the bed to glare at him. "What the hell, Dazai?!"

"I'm here to steal you for a very important mission."

"I don't care! What are you doing in my bedroom?!"

"Well, you weren't answering any of my calls."

"So, you just came here and stared at me while I'm sleeping like a fucking creep?!"

“I did ring the bell. About twenty times.” Getting to his feet, Dazai flaps his hands through the air. “Don’t worry, Chuuya. You didn’t say anything embarrassing in your sleep. I promise.”

But the words only bring back memories — painfully vivid memories of the dream Chuuya was having mere *seconds* before…

Oh god, did he say something? Did Dazai hear him say something?

“You will still have the entire day to yell at me, but now you should really try to get up,” Dazai says and claps his hands together. “Hop, hop, Chuuya. It’s a matter of life and death.”

Chuuya hisses out a breath but slips out of bed to talk to his bathroom and let the door bang shut after him. Seriously, who does he think he is, just barging in here like that, huh? Not a single ounce of respect for privacy. None! He washes his face and brushes his teeth with the fury of a thousand blazing suns powering him on. He’s almost done when his eyes flicker down and sees the glaringly obvious morning wood waiting to be noticed. *Completely normal*, he tells himself even as his fingers curl into tight fists. *Nothing to do with that dream he had. Nope. Nothing.* And maybe if he feels his gut twitch when a particularly vivid image of someone’s body pressing him down and rolling against him flashes through him, that’s totally normal too. Just his body doing body things.

Chuuya isn’t masochistic enough to start jerking off now while *he* is in the room next door, and apparently, there is not enough time to just wait for it to go down either, so he does what everyone with the ability to manipulate gravity would do: he decreases the blood flow to his dick until there are no more hard-ons and no more intrusive *thoughts.* The first works perfectly — sharing sleeping spaces with a bunch of other kids during puberty made Chuuya creative, the latter… not so much.

Fingers twisting around the doorknob, he thinks that it’s still better than facing Dazai with a raging hard-on while wearing only boxer briefs.

When he comes out, his brows tug into a frown. The distracting cocktail of sleep and hypertensive anger hijacked his mind up until now, so he can’t tell whether he somehow missed the fact that Dazai is dressed completely differently or whether the change happened while he was in the bathroom.

Dazai nods at a pile of clothes on the bed. “Get dressed.”

“What exactly are we doing?” Chuuya demands to know as he inspects his outfit. It looks like some kind of tactical gear. The same thing Dazai is wearing right now.

“There’s a bomb threat in the city that we need to take care of.”

Chuuya slowly looks at him. “We do?”

Dazai meets his gaze with a smoldering smile. “Of course, we do, Chuuya. Do you want hundreds of people to die?”

“Obviously not. Aren’t there special task forces for that, though? What does the port mafia have to do with it?” Then he pauses. “Wait, is it the mafia’s bomb?” It elicits a fuzzy, humming noise from Dazai that makes Chuuya’s head snap back to him. “Seriously?”

“Let’s just say that it will look like it if we don’t reverse situations now. Don’t worry; you will understand soon enough.”

After getting little to no information out of that man once again, Chuuya sighs and puts on the pants. They’re wide but heavy and surprisingly fitting. “Wouldn’t it be just easier to tell me now?”

“I like to build up suspense.”

“I think you just like to hold all the cards in the room.”

Next is a tight matching black shirt.

“Less thinking, Chuuya, and more dressing.”

When he sweeps another glance at Dazai, Chuuya is miffed to be reminded again that Dazai has arms. Well-defined arms. With lean muscles and shit. Something that isn’t visible under all the layers he usually wears, but that is hard to miss now… or when he is pinning someone down with the same arms.

Chuuya averts his gaze before Dazai can catch him — the memory of being woken up by him still way too fresh. And that *dream*. That fucking dream. Instead, he focuses on figuring out how to properly secure the plate carrier, what with all the straps, fumbling around with them until Dazai suddenly shoves his hands away and takes over. His fingers are as steady as mountains when they secure everything into place.

His proximity, on the other hand, is stifling. It makes even a room as

big as Chuuya's feel small and crammed because it keeps reminding him of what he did, what *they* did, together, when they were this fucking close in the dream.

"Here," Dazai says and scans his chest before nodding in approval, thankfully oblivious to Chuuya's struggles. "Looks good."

Grateful to be able to step away, he locates the boots and slips into them. "I'm ready," he announces, spinning on his heels with his hands on his hips, only for Dazai to waggle some kind of holster in his hand and sink to one knee in front of him. Chuuya's throat goes dry. But Dazai is unbothered, looping the holster around his thigh and humming rhythmically under his breath.

"Too tight?"

"No." Chuuya can barely hear his own voice over the pounding of his heart. "'s fine."

How many times did he listen to all the rumors about the terrible and dreadful boss of the port mafia? How many times did he swear to ruin him someday mid-battle? How many times did he see people kneel before Dazai? And now, Dazai is here, kneeling in front of him instead. Like it holds no significance at all.

Dazai's eye lifts and meets his gaze, one hand temporarily resting on his thigh. Not for the first time in his life, Chuuya wonders if perhaps mind-reading is the secret ability that he has been hiding all this time. It certainly would explain how Dazai knows so much and why he looks at Chuuya like he knows exactly what is going through his head.

If you are somehow able to hear this, know that I am going to smash you to pieces, Chuuya thinks, just to test his theory.

And because he probably needs something more shocking: *I am going to betray you someday.*

But even this, as absurd as it sounds, is probably not enough. Not for someone like Dazai.

I had a dream about kissing you.

Chuuya's pulse drums like a war song in his ears.

And I liked it. I liked it a lot.

The only thing Dazai does is exhaling softly before rising back to his full height, still giving Chuuya his undivided attention. “Now Chuuya is ready.”

There is no way Dazai would know about the dream and not bring it up. Right? So no mind-reading ability. Though that conclusion would be more relieving if Chuuya didn’t know that Dazai doesn’t need the ability to read people like open books anyway.

Chuuya nods then catches a glimpse of himself in his mirror and scours his nightstand for hair ties as Dazai walks ahead. Sleeping with his hair open is fine, but it becomes a pain in the ass when he’s physically active — something that always makes Yuan gently remind him that a pair of scissors could easily fix the problem, and something that he always declines, no matter how annoying it gets. Following Dazai through his apartment, he pulls it up into a high ponytail.

Waiting for the elevator, he feels Dazai’s gaze follow his hands moving. It makes his fingers uncharacteristically clumsy, almost losing the hair tie tangled around them before the doors slide open and save him that embarrassment.

The electrical silence in the four walls around them charges Chuuya’s thoughts with even more bouncing energy.

This is strange. He has become used to spend hours in the office whether it’s to work on his writing and reading, or to listen to Dazai talk about the way he is doing things. But now they are venturing outside. To diffuse a fucking bomb, apparently. And it doesn’t make any sense. Why would the head of the port mafia willingly subject himself to so much danger?

The elevator rides straight down to the underground carpark. The doors glide open to reveal a sleek-black van waiting for them, its engine already running.

Dazai opens the doors and lets Chuuya hop in first before climbing in himself and sliding them shut.

“How are you guys fairing on this fine morning?” That sounds and looks a lot like Albatross. “Ready to diffuse some bombs? Haha, not this one, though. I might be a bomb, but I’m not diffusible.”

Sighing, Chuuya scrubs a hand over his face.

“Okay, tough audience. Rough night, Chuuya-kun?”

“Just a rough morning,” Dazai decides to answer, but at least his voice is 60% less explosive cheerfulness and 50% more amused silk. “Chuuya, here have something sweet.”

“What?”

“Breakfast on the road. Working on an empty stomach isn’t good.”

Chuuya scowls at the box of muffins Dazai is trying to offer him. “I don’t want anything sweet from you.”

Dazai hums in reply and grabs another box. “Something savory then? Okonomiyaki.”

Chuuya wants to deny it yet again, but his stomach beats him to it—with an inhumanely, loud growl. With no other choice, he begrudgingly accepts the box. “Are you going to finally tell me what the hell we’re doing here, or am I only allowed to know when it’s already over?” he asks after swallowing down a few bites. It’s good, but despite the hunger, his stomach feels oddly full already. Of what, he doesn’t know.

“Someone sent a letter saying there is a bomb that could blow up a good portion of Yokohama if it’s not disabled in time.” Dazai shrugs and pulls his mouth into a small, false pout. “Now half of the city is running around and trying to find it before it’s too late.”

Then he pauses, looking at Chuuya. It makes him raise his brows. Clearly, he’s supposed to work for every bit of information. “Okay. Why would you even give people the chance to stop the bomb by sending a stupid letter?” Except the answer is obvious, especially when he remembers what Dazai told him: *but it will look like it if we don’t reverse situations.* “They want people to know about it to… frame the mafia?”

“Mm,” Dazai confirms with a hum. “Pretty rude, don’t you agree?”

Chuuya snorts. “More like, pretty dumb. It’s the damn mafia. Why try to frame a bunch of criminals as… criminals?”

“Oi,” Albatross suddenly butts in. “After everything we’ve been through together, that’s all we are to you?”

“You pointed a gun at my face and pretended to pull the trigger,” Chuuya replies dryly. “So, uh, yeah?”

“That was not my idea! I was just following orders!”

Dazai’s lips rise. “While you’re not exactly wrong, you’re also missing some things. If the city only viewed the port mafia as a bunch of criminals, as you say, we would long be gone. But we aren’t because we’re also useful. Strong. Powerful. Intimidating. We’re like a powered-up corrupt military that every country denies to have.”

“Fine,” Chuuya relents, “useful criminals then. And now, someone is trying to take that away from us. You know who?”

A nod.

“Shigeho Kumazawa. A lower-level grunt that joined the mafia last year.”

Now there is no logical reason why a grunt would all of a sudden turn traitor, especially not on this scale. Unless… “He was a spy?”

“Good,” Dazai praises softly. Chuuya wishes he had anywhere to look but at him. As it is, there are only the two of them here, and unless he wants to spend the ride staring at the back of Albatross’ head, Dazai and his stupid face it is. “He was indeed.”

“And you knew all along.” Because that’s just a given by now. Dazai always knows. “So why didn’t you stop him?”

“Because he has been working for another organization this entire time, and several people to interrogate are better than one.”

“You think the others will show up?”

“They wasted so much effort and time to create this spectacle,” Dazai says and looks off into the distance. His hair is usually a neat mess, but today it looks especially tousled, strands of hair sticking up here and there, yet all they do is make him look more handsome. And he probably *knows* it, or he wouldn’t be offering Chuuya such a show. “They will either try to make sure it works out, not leaving it in the hands of fate or useless underlings, or they simply want to watch it unfold from up-close. But they will be there.”

Chuuya finally puts his box away. “So what exactly do you want us to do? Do we know where the bomb is?”

“Nope.”

“Huh? Then where are we going?”

As if on cue, the car comes to a smooth halt. Albatross cuts the engine. Chuuya looks over his shoulder to glance out of the window, coming face to face with a reddish-brown brick building.

They must be somewhere in Naka-Ku, he notes to himself. The ward is pretty much the opposite of Suribachi city: snobby, wealthy residential areas and hosting the city hall and the headquarters of the prefectural government. The only times Chuuya ever found himself here was when he needed a high-rise building and an hour alone to think.

“Do you know who the police turn to when they’re in over their head?”

“You?”

Dazai’s mouth twitches. “That’s when shit is really hitting the fan. Before that.”

“I’m guessing whoever is in that building.”

“Have you ever heard of *the armed detective agency?*”

“Ah, so that’s where their office is,” Chuuya concludes out loud before huffing out a breath. “Obviously, I’ve heard of them. Don’t tell me you want to work with them?”

“Neh, not today. I just had one of our command units engage in battle with one of their detectives over a man who cost us lots of money. Too soon.”

Chuuya raises his brows.

With a loud, content sigh, Dazai throws his arms behind his back and stretches out his legs, forcing Chuuya to scoot out of the way if he doesn’t want his stupid boots kicking him in the balls. “We’re letting them do all the work of figuring out the location of the bomb while we sit back and wait.”

“So… we have to wait until *they* find the bomb?!”

“Uh-uh.”

“What if they fail?”

“They won’t.”

“How would you know?”

“You might not like them, Chuuya, but same as us, there is a reason why their organization exists. They’ve got a couple of smart heads working there.”

“Then why did you wake me up acting like we were out of time when we have plenty of it?!”

Dazai yawns. “They could start moving any second now. Better to be early than late.”

Chuuya wants to tell him in just how many different ways he would bash his face against the asphalt if so many things weren’t at stake, but by now, he knows better than to feed Dazai’s ego with even more attention. So he resigns himself to being cramped into four walls with him — and with Albatross, who, however, is staring at his phone — by folding his arms over his chest and staring holes at the wall next to Dazai’s head.

But doing nothing has always been hard for him, not when his body, brain, and his ability always demand to be active, which is probably why his eyes end up drifting. To faces. To faces that look blissfully relaxed across from him. Chuuya wonders whether it’s Dazai’s gruesome sleeping habits that allow him to shut off his brain and sink into nothingness, even while he’s in a car, waiting to begin an exciting, dangerous mission, or whether it’s simply one of his many, many talents. Probably both.

Unfortunately, the word *talent* triggers another memory of that damn dream again, and suddenly Chuuya is thinking about other talents Dazai might have. He seemed to be very talented with his mouth. Knew exactly how to use it. It wasn’t real, though, just a series of images that his own head cooked up for some inexplicable reason. Maybe Dazai is an awful kisser in reality. Maybe he’s that kind of person that pecks you like a fucking chicken instead of kissing you. Or maybe he uses too much tongue without any invitation. That seems plausible, right?

Except Chuuya suddenly remembers that Dazai does *not*. During their ‘wedding’ ceremony, he expected all of these things, yet all Dazai did was kiss the corner of his mouth as his hand covered both of their faces. It feels so long ago now, even though it’s been only one month, but the realization that they already shared a kiss once, no matter how

perfunctory and dry, feels shockingly staggering.

Across from him, Dazai's one eye flutters open and squints at him.

Caught in the act of staring — blatant, hard staring — Chuuya makes a last-minute decision and furrows his brows into a glare, not looking away. Because looking away would mean running and running from someone like Dazai is admitting defeat. No, if he just pretends to have been glaring at him all this time instead of… nevermind — if Dazai sees him glaring, that's nothing new or worth his attention. That's just ordinary.

Dazai stares back at him for a few moments, then closes his eyes again. Chuuya's chest sags with relief.

"Oi, Chuuya," Albatross asks, breaking the silence that has settled over the three of them. "Can I ask you a question?"

Grateful to have something else to focus on, Chuuya glances at their driver. "What?"

"That pink-haired chick that always hangs around with you. She your girlfriend?" Before Chuuya can answer, Albatross spins around, looking at Dazai, back at Chuuya, and then scratching his head. "Boss, I can ask that, right? Or is the whole marriage thing serious? Are you two...?"

To Chuuya's horror, Dazai offers a half-shrug and says, "I don't know. Are we, Chuuya?"

"We aren't *anything*," Chuuya snaps, heart, slamming wildly inside his chest, before his glower lands on Albatross. "It was a contract and an allyship, nothing more than that. Or do I look like I'm actually married to that guy?!"

Albatross lifts his hands in defense. "Look, I don't know what goes on behind closed doors."

"Nothing goes on behind closed doors!"

"Okay, I'm sorry!"

"There you have your answer," Dazai butts in lazily, his eyes still closed. "So go ahead. Ask."

"So that chick…"

“Yuan’s not my girlfriend either,” Chuuya mutters in exasperation.

“And that’s… bad?” Albatross says slowly.

“Hah?”

“I mean, is that a bad thing? Do you want her to be?”

“What? No. We’re just friends.”

“Really? It’s okay if there’s more than that, you know. You can tell me. Us. I’m a wonderful wingman, I’ll have you know.”

“There isn’t more than that, so no thanks. Why are you even asking?”

Albatross holds his gaze for a moment, eyes narrowed as if he is contemplating something before he taps his finger against the steering wheel and says, “because I need to get laid.”

Chuuya blinks.

“Like yesterday,” he adds.

“With me? Are you… hitting on me?”

Not really sure what to say here, Chuuya’s eyes dart to the side only to see that Dazai has deemed this conversation interesting enough to follow with his eye open, an amused smile on his lips.

“What?” Albatross asks. “I meant your friend. Yuan. I was trying to figure out if she is single.” Then his head cocks, though. “Why? Are you offering? Because I’m not picky. And you’re pretty…” He trails off to look back at Dazai again. “Boss, that still okay?”

Dazai hums. “Ask Chuuya.”

“You’re pretty hot,” Albatross continues casually, “but I figured I’d probably stay in my territory and not…” He makes some kind of hand gesture. “... you know, but hey, if it’s okay with everyone here! *Are* you offering?”

Chuuya stares at him for a few moments, speechless, before exclaiming, “no?!”

“Dang.” Albatross doesn’t look too upset about it, though. “So Yuan. She single then?”

“Ask her yourself if you want to know,” he mutters. “I’m not some kind of pimp.”

“Hey, I was just trying to be respectful in case she’s already seeing anyone. That’s not a crime, is it?”

Exhaling, Chuuya lets his eyes fall shut, too. “It’s not, but you should talk to her yourself anyway. I don’t know whether she has time to think about relationships right now.”

“Who said anything about relationships? I just need to unwind,” Albatross says and lets out a whiny groan. “The thing they never tell you about the mafia is that fucking civilians is always too risky, so you’re forced to only depend on the people you work with. Co-workers and hookers, that’s all. It might seem much, but it isn’t! It really isn’t! What did the real world taste like before you joined, Chuuya?”

“Huh?”

“You had all the options in the world until of late. Did you use it to its full advantage?”

Chuuya looks at him flatly. “I was kind of busy looking after my people to go around fucking everyone in sight.”

“So, what…” Albatross blinks at him with wide eyes. “Nothing? Not even… a little… fun?”

“Not *nothing*,” Chuuya feels the need to correct because even though there is nothing wrong with being a virgin, *he* isn’t one. “I had… fun. Just not all the time.”

“With Yuan?”

“No! I fucking told you it’s not like that!”

“Sorry, sorry.” Chuuya thinks Albatross is finally satisfied enough to drop the topic, but he is wrong. So wrong. “Let me guess, with one of the other two then. Nothing like blowing off some steam with a friend! That silver-haired dude or the one with a military cut? What are their names?”

“Not telling you.”

“Ah, so I *am* getting warmer! Boss, do you know their names?”

“I would feel safer working with Chuuya without risking his wrath.”

Chuuya rolls his eyes. “How do you even know so much?”

“Well, duh. How many years did you sheep people make my job unnecessarily difficult? Always know thy enemy and all that.”

“Since we’re no longer enemies,” Chuuya lies shamelessly, “how about you stick your nose out of business that doesn’t concern you?”

“But I’m bored,” Albatross whines, miserably hugging his seat. “And sex-deprived. Anyways, my guess is on the silver-haired one. He looks somewhat friendly. The other one just looks mad all the time. Even at you, Chuuya, so I don’t know about that one. Unless it was hate-sex? That would work.”

Chuuya makes a mistake. He looks away. Even worse than that, his eyes flicker to Dazai, and that one second of eye contact is enough to reveal the answer to that question. To everyone inside the car.

“Oh, shit. Really?” Albatross asks.

That’s when Dazai opens his mouth, but to Chuuya’s surprise, it’s not to comment on the current topic. “Have you already arranged the transportation for the arms shipment from the east tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow?” Albatross’s brows tug into a frown. “I thought it’s next week?”

“It’s tomorrow,” Dazai answers. “Get to it before you botch an entire deal.” His tone isn’t cruel, per se, but it’s still worlds away from the one that Chuuya has gotten used to. Amused, a little impish, strangely soft, and nostalgic.

While the question is innocent enough on the surface to distract Albatross, it’s not subtle enough either to fool Chuuya, not after all the days he spent with the man studying his ways. Dazai did that on purpose. To change the conversation. To let Chuuya and his past sex and love life on the hook. The only thing Chuuya doesn’t know is whether he did it out of pity, boredom or something entirely else.

Chuuya doesn’t know how to *feel* about it either. Talking about Luca and the disastrous way their relationship ended isn’t particularly enjoyable, but he doesn’t need Dazai to rescue him from it. He doesn’t need anything from Dazai except the truth — and that’s the one thing that Dazai refuses to give him.

If Dazai expects anything like gratitude from him, he doesn't let it show. He doesn't even bother to look at Chuuya or in his direction, one eye shut again and head slightly tipped up as he sits and waits patiently.

So much for something else to focus on, Chuuya thinks to himself. If his only choices are to think about that dream and Dazai and his tongue in Chuuya's mouth, or thinking about Luca and how the same guy who once swore he would do anything to get another chance now sees him as some inherently evil monster, then he would prefer to let the bomb take him out.

He decides to mull over something useful instead. Dazai's weak spot. His flaw. The thing that Chuuya can exchange to get answers about himself, the sheep, about everything. He goes over everything he has already learned about Dazai. His sleeping schedule. His coke habit. His relationship to Gin and Albatross. Jiji. His way of steering the port mafia: making moves while always being ten steps ahead already, using selective honesty to his advantage, knowing *everything,* using rumors and images to keep enemies in check, being everywhere even though he is supposedly always hiding in his impenetrable fortress, losing battles to win even bigger wars.

There is no… pattern to him. No sense of logic or system, not really. One minute he is taking a nap on the couch with Chuuya in the same room, the next, he is stealing back USB drives that Chuuya stole from him first.

Trying to get a hold of something solid from Dazai is like trying to keep water in your palms. You can't. He just slips through your fingers.

"You're thinking." Chuuya's eyes lift to look at Dazai, but he's still unmoving. It was clearly his voice, though. "Stop it."

"I can do whatever I want," he mutters under his breath.

"Okay. But you're also staring."

"Hah?! No, I'm not." Not anymore. Or is he? "Your eye's closed, so how would you even know?"

Dazai's chest rises with an inhale. "I just do."

"You're full of shit is what you are."

“You know when you’re sleeping but feel like someone is watching you, so you open your eyes and find a spider on the ceiling? You’re my spider.”

Chuuya is about to snap out another counter-argument when several high-pitched *beeps* chime through the car.

“Oi,” Albatross says, tossing his phone to the side and starting the engine, “they’re moving. Let’s go!”

The car comes to life with a motoric hum. Now that they’re moving, the tension that has bottled up in Chuuya’s neck and shoulders begins to seep out with each breath that leaves him. Finally.

Dazai opens his eye and lazily stretches himself before casting a glance at the road. “Albatross.”

“They look to be heading towards… the port right now.”

He can tell that just by following their route? Impressive for such a windbag.

“The port,” Dazai repeats and then nods like it makes total sense. “Planting a bomb near petrochemical containers will do the trick, I guess.”

Petrochemical containers — he means the oil storage facility. Being one of Japan’s most distinguished port cities, Yokohama is a prominent place for ship fuel transport. A vast area of the bay coast is dedicated to storing oil and natural gas. Not to mention, the combine is surrounded by chemical processing plants for crude oil, iron, and steel, along with an oil refinery plant which altogether powers much of Japan’s most notable industries.

If a bomb were to go off nearby…

He guesses? It could cost thousands of lives and work places. It could cripple the city’s industry for months, years even.

“Are you sure those agency detectives are capable enough for this job?” Chuuya asks him.

Dazai flashes him a smoldering smirk. “Well, if they aren’t, we’re still there to clean it up, right? Speaking of… how much can you do with your ability? Think stopping a bomb from exploding is in it?”

Chuuya swallows. Is it? He'd have to control *particles* but —

The car suddenly comes to a screeching halt, making his organs flop about in his stomach.

"They just did a complete 180," Albatross shouts. "You think they know we're following them?"

"We'll risk that. Don't lose them," Dazai replies and fishes out a radio out of his pocket, turning it one with his thumb as Albatross turns around in the middle of the road and floors it. Static noise greets them, but it quickly switches to what sounds like someone's communication line:

"-- it will be difficult to move the device because of the set timer."

"How long to disarm it?"

"Hours. Longer than we have."

"Shit."

"Have you started evacuating the nearby residents? You have to hurry before this thing blows."

"We're on it."

Dazai turns it off again, tossing one leg over the other while his fingers tap a steady rhythm against his knee. His one eye squints.

He's thinking.

It's a rare sight. Usually, he doesn't need to because he already saw it coming weeks ago, but now Chuuya can see ideas and possibilities swirling around in his head like tiny fireflies. It makes him look oddly human.

"They must have found another way to disarm it. That's why they turned around," he eventually concludes.

"How in the world do you diffuse a bomb that's kilometers away?" Albatross questions, a manic pitch to his voice.

"With a stop signal. If you have a transmitter, you can send a stop signal."

"Ah, of course! I have no idea what you're talking about, but it sounds

logical!”

Chuuya scrubs a hand over his face. “I would have rather taken my chance with my ability.”

“Are you 100% sure you could have stopped it without getting blown to pieces in the process?” Dazai asks.

“No, but —”

“Then taking this chance is better.”

“It’s one life over hundreds.”

“If you died, you wouldn’t stop the bomb, so everyone else would die, too. It’s your life *and* hundreds of others over hundreds of others.”

The subtle but sudden firmness of Dazai’s voice makes Chuuya press his lips together. Is it just a matter of numbers, or is it something else, something that has to do with Chuuya’s purpose in his long game?

Asking would be useless.

They race through the mountains, following the agency’s car from a safe distance until they eventually reach a pretty isolated area, the overgrown shrubbery here throwing shadows across the entire road outside the tinted windows.

Stopping in front of an iron door in the very face of the mountain itself, Albatross lets out a whistle. “The hell is this place?”

“The former national defense force,” Chuuya and Dazai reply at the same time.

Dazai turns to him, cocking his head.

“What?” Chuuya huffs. “You’re not the only one around here who knows things.” Years ago, when he was desperately searching for anything that could tell him what happened to him when he was young, he spent a lot of time digging through the history of abilities. The war was an inevitable part of it. And this right here is a relic of said war. It’s an entrance to a bomb shelter and an old military installation of the former national defense force.

The sound of gunshots cuts his thoughts short, followed by an explosive burst of lights from the inside.

“Aww, a flash grenade,” Dazai murmurs. “It’s like watching our own people.” That playful expression of his doesn’t linger for long, though. He quickly gets to his feet, beckoning Chuuya to do the same with a nod as he fires off orders. “Albatross, stay here and in contact and be ready for us once we’re done. You,” his gaze finds Chuuya’s, “make sure I don’t die today. Can you do that?”

“It would be a lot easier if you had just sent someone else to do this job,” Chuuya mutters even as he follows him out of the vehicle and into the woods. “Don’t tell me there isn’t a single person in the port mafia who could have done all of this without you being here.”

“Can you do it or not?”

“Of course I can.”

“Good.”

Aggravating, unresourceful, time-wasting child of a man that —

Chuuya stops short when he catches a glimpse of Dazai from the side — a glimpse of his *entire* face. Of his right eye, his uncovered and totally fine right eye. Dazai catches his gaze. With both of his eyes. And it somehow feels even more unnerving than usual.

“Chuuya,” he says. “Focus.”

Dragging his eyes away, Chuuya blows out a breath and mirrors him instead. Guns drawn, they trek through the forest. He is focused. Very, very focused. Maybe not on the right things given the gravity of their situation, but that’s hardly his fault.

“Who exactly are we supposed to be right now if the agency asks?” Because they will when two strangers suddenly show up. Two strangers that aren’t supposed to be from the port mafia.

“Military police,” Dazai tells him quietly. “So make sure to tone down your ability unless it’s absolutely necessary. As for us, we’ve been partners ever since we were fifteen. Hated each other’s guts at first, but facing life-or-death situations together built a unique, powerful bond of trust between us. Everyone fears us because of how good we work together when we’re not busy tearing each other’s throats out.”

Chuuya’s eyes narrow. “Pretty sure you can’t join the military police when you’re still underage.”

“Fine. Since we were eighteen then.”

Correcting Dazai for once — and not the other way around — makes Chuuya preen with childish pride, so much that he basically bumps into Dazai’s back when he pauses at the edge of the forest. It earns him another reprimanding look.

“I’m focused,” Chuuya hisses.

Dazai doesn’t reply. Instead, he jerks his head towards a small iron building in the near distance. “The maintenance building. The transmitter signal should be coming from there.”

“The noises come from the bomb shelter, though,” Chuuya says.

“Doesn’t matter. The first priority is making sure the signal is stopped. Second is securing as many enemy forces as possible before the agency ships them off to prison.”

After another look at each other, Dazai sets off and swiftly steers them across a switchyard and towards the two-story building. There is an abandoned automobile and airplane hangar inside, but judging by the distant sound of heavy slamming coming from above, it’s not empty anymore. Dazai bolts towards the stairs. The rush of his steps is startling, which is why Chuuya yanks him back with a hand looping in the belts of his west and pushes himself in front of him to take the lead. If his job is to keep Dazai alive, then Chuuya is going to draw a line in the sand and stick it out.

Ignoring the odd noise of complaint behind him, Chuuya jogs up the stairs with one arm keeping Dazai behind him. The rush of the upcoming battle heats his blood. His heart beats a steady, excited beat. He’s ready to finally use his skills to —

They reach the second floor, but those noises that sounded like a brutal fight actually come from a tall guy in a trench coat slamming a much larger man’s head into the wall over and over. It’s less a fight than a one-man race.

At the same time as Chuuya intends to disarm both of them until they figure out who is who, the trench coat wearer rolls to the side with alarming speed and instead of latching onto its target, for the tainted sorrow comes up empty. For a few seconds only, until the man touches ground again. But it’s enough time for someone to suddenly yank him back. Chuuya’s spine meets a warm chest with a stifled gasp.

“That’s a detective,” he hears Dazai’s voice in his ear. “And I said *tone it down*.”

Oh.

“Who are you?” the guy -- the detective snaps and emphasizes his question by pointing a fucking gun at them. Good guy or not, that just pisses Chuuya off.

“Military police,” Dazai says, and Chuuya feels him lift his hands as a sign of peace. It’s wrong. Wrong for someone like him to be doing that for some detective twerp. “Our captain sent us here to stop the signal of a bomb. And who are you, kind stranger, that is aiming a gun at authorities?”

The detective’s eyes narrow. “I’m with the armed detective agency. How can I be sure you’re not actually the people who planted the bomb?”

“We could ask you the same thing, but for the sake of speed and efficiency, I’m not going to. My partner and I both have IDs. I can toss them over to you if you want to take a look.”

“And lose the gun,” Chuuya growls.

For a moment, nothing happens. Dazai behind him. Chuuya as his bulletproof body shield. The detective’s eyes narrowed in suspicion. All three of them in a headlock.

Then he nods.

Chuuya hears and feels Dazai shift as he slowly fishes out, what must be, a forged ID from somewhere. A moment later, his hand slides into Chuuya’s pocket instead. He has to force his muscles to relax even if all they want to do is go rigid with tension because of the sheer madness of having Dazai not only so close that Chuuya feels his breath tickle his neck, but also fumbling around in his pockets.

He feels disappointment and relief trading dizzying blows with each other when Dazai finally steals back his hand and chuck the IDs at the detective’s feet. They apparently look real enough to settle any suspicions for now. Exhaling, the man nods.

“Sorry about that, but you can never be too sure. How did you even find this place?”

Dazai steps back out of Chuuya's personal space and takes all the warmth with him.

"The agency is not the only one with good intelligence and hard-working employees… what's your name?"

"Oda."

"We have capable workers as well, Oda-san," Dazai chirps out over a headboard with rusty buttons and navigations. "Oh dear, this machine is practically archaic!"

As Oda joins Dazai, Chuuya makes sure that the other man stays flat on the ground before securing the rest of the small room. It's then that he takes a look out of the display window, seeing one figure down there throw the other one around like a ragdoll.

"Oi, detective-san," he says, "which one of these is your partner?"

Oda takes one look at the scene and curses softly. "Shit. That's Kunikida."

Chuuya clicks his tongue with growing distaste the longer he has to watch the fight. "Is that Kunikida guy just incompetent or what's going on?"

"He's competent all right," Oda mutters, though he sounds more worried than anything. "We went in blind. We had no idea they had an ability user. But now that I think about it… ah, fuck, *the numbers."*

Dazai tilts his head curiously. "The numbers?"

"We had someone in isolated protection die all of a sudden. The only thing they found on him was a number on his palm." The detective pushes away from the headboard, head shaking. "I have to help Kunikida before –"

"Don't be hasty," Dazai cuts in, grabbing the sleeve of Oda's beige coat. It makes both Chuuya and the detective blink. "If you try to help him now, you'll end up the same, and then you'll both die."

"I could knock him out," Chuuya offers, and when he remembers that he is supposed to be a boring, unordinary military police offer: "I'm fast."

Dazai shakes his head. "We need —"

“Get down!” Oda wrestles both of them to the ground, and a second later, a line of fire shatters the display window into a thousand tiny pieces that rain down on them like a glass shower. Chuuya is only quick enough to shelter *himself* from the cuts, having failed to see something coming twice in a row. His teeth grit in violently escalating frustration.

“You didn’t take everyone out?!” he hisses.

“That ability-user must have got to my partner before he could do that,” Oda replies, face calm despite the irritation in his voice. “I can distract the shooters, lead them away, but we still need the key for the transmitter, or all of this is in vain.”

A thin trail of blood is running down Dazai’s cheek when Chuuya looks at him. Shockingly red in contrast to his pale skin. “No, we don’t have that much time left. Chuuya,” their gazes meet, “take out the snipers. We take out the ability user. I have a feeling he has the key.”

Chuuya immediately shakes his head. “*No*. You said it yourself. You’ll only end up like that ragdoll down there.”

“I have a plan. It will work.”

“You told me to keep you *alive*,” Chuuya growls, not caring whether it doesn’t match with their military police cover story, not right now.

“You think I would come up with a strategy where I end up dead?” Dazai doesn’t give him the time to respond. “Go. *Now.”*

With a muffled snarl, Chuuya pushes up on his hands and rises to his feet, instantly finding a corner when another round of shots rings through the air. Bullets have no use against him, but apparently Dazai doesn’t want him to make use of that without alerting anyone to this fact.

“Are you sure about this?” he hears the detective ask somewhat baffled. Tch, as if Chuuya needs that. “There are, at least, ten men out there.”

Dazai doesn’t sound worried at all. “You’d be surprised to see how capable *my* partner is.”

Chuuya takes another peak, fires his own shot, and clicks his tongue when he sees where the bastards are hiding. The entire hangar is surrounded by balconies that offer the perfect shooting range. He all

but kicks the door off its hinges after ensuring that Dazai is still safe before taking off into a sprint to get this thing moving. While disarming with his ability would take less than ten seconds, it would also betray that they might be more than simple military officers, and that subsequently could ruin Dazai's plans to go home with prisoners and clear the port mafia's name from this mess – however he intends to do *that*.

So Chuuya chases the snipers as far away from Dazai and the detective as possible, playing the role of a suicidal but rather agile madman who manages to evade every bullet that gets fired at him. He chases them to the roof of the building where no one but him and the merciless night sky will be witness to the carnage he is about to unleash on them.

Then he strikes.

One step forward renders the men incapacitated in the air. Then he kicks off the ground and ricochets of the wall behind him to knock them out one by one, glancing off the ground and the wall again and again, quick and dirty, before landing in a squat with a shuddering chest. The red glow of for the tainted sorrow fading.

There. Done. No one saw him, and the men won't be a bother anymore without being dead either.

A shot rings through the air then. His reflexes are fast enough for the bullet to simply bounce off him, but the fact that someone managed to fire at all is…

Chuuya's work is *flawless*. Or it should be. Yet there, in the midst of the heap of bodies, one man is still very much conscious, trying to haul himself to his wobbling feet with a gun in his hands that he uses to shoot at him *again*.

And something about that just trips Chuuya off, makes him stalk over and slam the weapon out of his hands before grabbing his neck and squeezing. It's only supposed to be a warning. After all, Dazai did say he wanted as many of them alive as possible. But Chuuya miscalculates. The throat under his fingers gives away, and within the blink of an eye, his hand breaks through skin and bones and blood, crushing the windpipe with a sickening noise. The man's head sags back lifelessly.

Chuuya's vision darkens over and over as he blinks at the dead man. Then he lets go. The body slumps to the floor.

Oh.

His gaze flickers down to his hand, stained with blood and body matter.

He is no saint. He has killed before. It's part of this life. And this man… he was part of a group that wanted to blow up half of the city.

But there is something nauseating about holding someone while you feel them die. Something perversely intimate about staring into someone's eyes when the light bulb flickers out.

Chuuya's not sure how long he stands there staring at his own hand. Too long, probably. Eventually, noises from below rattle him awake, and he takes a step back from the corpse with a shaky breath, then another, before spinning around altogether and hailing himself over the railing so he can land on the ground level.

For a dizzying moment, he looks around, and when he doesn't immediately see Dazai, something in him trembles. Because if Dazai ended up dead, he would have not only failed to do his damn job, but he would also never find what he's looking for. He'd never know. He'd never be able to tell Dazai how much he hates him again. And —

Chuuya hears his voice first. Then Dazai comes out from behind a corner, leading a man in a green parka towards the exit.

Chuuya's chest falls so heavily the entire place spins as he jogs up to him. Dazai's mouth widens into a smile when he spots him, though his eyes don't fail to take inventory of the drying blood on his hands.

"You're fine," Chuuya says, not really sure whether it's a question or a statement.

"Naturally," Dazai replies and lightly kicks his prisoner in the shin when he refuses to move. "Are you?"

"Yeah. What happened?" Chuuya glances around. "Where are the detectives?"

"In the control room and on the phone with their agency."

"Did you find the key?"

"It was broken, but Oda-san's partner recreated an exact replica with his ability just in time."

“They still think we’re the military police?”

Dazai hums.

The guy, on the other hand, snaps his head around, frowning furiously. “What do you mean they think? You’re not?!”

“Oh, buddy,” Dazai drawls, “we’re going to have so much fun together.”

“What the hell do you mean by that?!”

“Make him shut up,” Chuuya mutters. There is a dull ache beginning to form in the back of his head, and the loud yapping will only make it worse.

“Did you hear that? My partner thinks you should shut up, so I’ll give you two choices: listen to him, or I’ll make you. Ah, wait. Changed my mind. I’ll do it myself.” After the man goes silent and his unconscious body slumps forward, Dazai, the bastard, makes Chuuya carry him. Then he asks, “where are the snipers?”

“Roof.”

“Would Chuuya mind getting them down here? Our extraction cars are already here thanks to Albatross. I will go back and distract the detectives while you’re busy.”

Chuuya does mind going back there, but he minds Dazai sniffing out any weak spots like this even more. “You mean you want to clear the port mafia’s name while you’re at it?”

“If I so happen to mention that the port mafia’s only involvement was a traitorous spy, then what the agency does with that information is up to them.” Shrugging, Dazai folds his arms behind his back. “Killing two birds with one stone. It’s crafty, no?”

A few of the other men are already packed into cars and Dazai all too happily shoves the organization's leader into the truck with the rest of them. An entire enemy group practically razed to the ground, and Dazai barely did any of the work. The agency did.

Going back on the roof is dreadful, but Chuuya locks away any lingering feeling of personal failure that led to this mistake and focuses on being quick and efficient instead. It doesn’t take long before everyone is packed away and the extraction cars with the

prisoners are starting to head back to the base. The only thing to do is to wait for Dazai to finally come back.

Chuuya is already starting to worry that they have been found out after all when he sees the man stroll out with the two detectives like he is chatting to long-lost friends of his. Only Dazai is bold enough to hijack a few dozen prisoners out from under some holier than thou agency's nose and make small talk with them the entire time – and even wave Chuuya over to join them.

The only reason why he listens is so he can personally drag Dazai back to the car.

"Your partner here was right," Oda says with an acknowledging nod, "you are pretty capable. One men against ten? Not everything has the strength, let alone the nerve."

Chuckling, Dazai pats him on the back. "You will not find anyone with more nerves than Chuuya-kun here."

"One against ten, huh?" The other one – Kunikida says with crossed arms. "Usually I'm against flaunting skills by forgoing safety protocols, but you not only helped us but Yokohama, too. Both of you. So on behalf of the agency and the entire city, thank you."

"Whatever," Chuuya mutters. The flood of praise and compliments makes him feel trapped in his own body, every word, sound, and exhale loud and irritating. "Don't make a big deal out of it."

"And look at how humble he is, too," Dazai drawls. "I'm afraid we must go now, but it has been a blast working with you. Chuuya-kun wasn't the only one who was impressive today. You all were."

It takes another eternity of pleasantries and goodbyes to finally get going.

Chuuya waits until it's only the two of them to grab Dazai's hand and look at it. No numbers. He checks the other before Dazai can pull away, but surprisingly, Dazai lets him without ever trying to.

They must have secured the ability-user somehow, but if everyone got a number, then Dazai should have one, too. Unless…

Chuuya lifts his gaze to look at him. Dazai stares back, his expression a book in a language that Chuuya doesn't understand — not yet, at least. He is still learning.

There could be a dozen different explanations, but slowly, an idea starts forming in Chuuya's head. He doesn't voice it out loud. Not yet.

Letting go of Dazai, he shoves his hands into the pockets of his west and heads towards the car. "Next time you want me to follow your orders, don't fucking tell me to be your bodyguard. It's either or. Not both."

"I never told you to be my bodyguard," he hears Dazai thrill behind him. "I wanted you to keep me alive, and that's what you did."

"Tch."

The ride of the home is silent. It's only been a few hours, at most, but Chuuya feels like he's been awake for days, an oppressive, heavy layer of exhaustion draping over him and not letting up. He stares at nothing in particular until his eyes flicker to his hands. The filthy, dried-up blood that sticks to his skin. Then he drags them away to stare off into the distance again.

He feels Dazai observe him, too, but as he doesn't say anything, Chuuya doesn't tell him to stop either.

It's only later after Albatross safely delivers them back to the base and they climb out of the truck and head towards the elevator, that Dazai speaks.

"Take a few days off."

Chuuya side-eyes him. "Why?"

"Because you've been working every day for nearly a month."

"I don't need a break just because I killed someone," he says with a dry exhale. Because that's what it is about, right? Dazai thinks he can't handle a little blood on his hands?

The elevator door slides open, and they step inside.

"And I'm not saying you do," Dazai tells him in the narrow space of the four walls around him. "You were distracted today. You did a good job, but you were still distracted. A few days off will do you good."

Chuuya can't really pinpoint what it is that makes it hurt. The fact that he was distracted by a dream, that he wouldn't have dried blood

under his nails if not for that, or the absurdity of wanting that recognition from the man that he is supposed to hate.

“Go see your beloved friends, and… buy yourself an ice cream, or whatever it is that you do when you are with them.”

“I thought you didn’t like my friends.”

“I don’t. But you do, so.”

When Chuuya glances up at him, there is this weird expression on his face, his mouth pressing together into a funny line, lashes fluttering, his arms pulled back behind his spine. Dazai looks awkward. It’s horrible.

“Okay,” is all Chuuya can say since awkwardness is apparently infectious.

Elevators seem to be working differently when Dazai is inside them — that, or they have a special *Boss onboard* setting — because it lifts them to Chuuya’s floor without a single interruption. There is a split second after it stops and before the doors open where Dazai lifts one of his hands and moves it like he is going to tap Chuuya on the back or his shoulder, but it just hovers there in the air, not touching but not returning to its former place either. Then the doors glide open. Chuuya steps out. He hears them slide shut behind him.

And Dazai is gone.

Chapter End Notes

> Thank you guys SO MUCH for all the comments, kudos and love <3 I'm having so much fun with this fic, so I'm really excited that you guys feel the same! I hope you enjoyed this chapter and a little pre-taste of what a kiss miiiiiiiiight look like in the future :3
>
> As you may have noticed I borrowed some information from the ‘Dazai’s entrance exam’ LN & the azure apostle episodes from the anime. I mashed it all together even worse than the anime lmaooo but just wanted to have that mentioned!
>
> Next up we have:
> - an attempt
> - the revelation of a secret
> - a confrontation

Chapter 11: Variations Under Nature

Chapter Notes

> Hello, we're back today with another update :) Thank you so much for the love and the feedback! When I say it's insanely motivating then I really, REALLY mean it because I literally wrote like 70k words of this fic in the last few weeks lmao so we're set for the next few months + I think I'll be able to switch to a weekly updating schedule once I'm finished with my semester and exams!
>
> Warning:(non-sexual) choking

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Dazai told him to take a break, he most likely didn't mean to go talk to the guy that not only broke his heart not too long ago but also now blames him for everything that went wrong with the group he is in and sees you as a thoughtless monster. Yet here Chuuya is, trekking through the mafia's loading bay because that's where Luca is stationed right now. Not because he doesn't respect himself, but because he respects the sheep too much to let a personal grudge split the whole group apart. And whether Chuuya likes it or not, Luca is part of the sheep. Has been so for the last two years. And probably will be for the next god knows how many.

It takes a while to find him. The entire dock is huge, and countless people are working here, most of them too busy to give Chuuya directions. In the end, he doesn't need them. The flash of a yellow beanie finally puts an end to his search.

When he approaches Luca as his back is turned to him, his mood teeters between inevitable anger and discomfort because talking things out has never been his greatest strength, especially not with people who have already made up their minds about him. "Hey."

Luca turns around, carrying a large box. "Oh. Hey." There is surprise in his gaze, a flash of weary irritation too, but to Chuuya's surprise, that's as bad as it gets before he nods and proceeds to load the box on a transport trolley. "Don't tell me they gave you a job here, too."

"No," Chuuya says with a dry snort, "I came here to talk. Got a minute?"

“I will if you help me load this entire thing before my superior comes back.”

“Oh, so now it’s okay to use my ability?”

Luca glances at him but doesn’t say anything as he leans down to grab another box. While Chuuya isn’t particularly thrilled about his blatant hypocrisy, taking a look around the storage room makes him take pity on him. There are a lot of boxes here, and the wind is ruthless today.

He kicks a few boxes with his foot and stacks them on top of each other. Luca fixes them with tape so they won’t fall, and then Chuuya lets it float neatly into the pony trailer.

“Look, I know I’ve been an asshole,” Luca says after they do this several times.

Chuuya expects to hear something else, but nothing comes out. His brows raise. “Yeah, I know that, too.”

“But can you blame me?”

“Pretty sure I can, yes.”

Luca lets out a sigh that almost gets drowned out by the wind. “Everything changed. From one day to another, everything as we knew it changed. You can’t seriously tell me that you don’t see how this mafia shit is slowly tearing the sheep apart.”

“Of course, I can see it,” Chuuya snaps. “But what you’re doing isn’t helping with that. It’s only making it worse.”

“I’m just trying to find a way out of here.”

“By doing what?” Looking at Luca and seeing the same stubbornly determined expression he wore when he talked about how awful and unnatural ability-users are, Chuuya shakes his head because it’s so stupid. So damn stupid. “Believing that bullshit those religious zealots spread on the streets? Telling everyone what a monster I am? Because that will solve all our problems, right?”

“I’m not — “ Luca scrubs a hand over his face. “I don’t think you’re a monster.”

“Crazy because I heard you say the opposite not too long ago.”

“I was mad at you.”

“And what did *I* ever do to you?!”

“You left!” it suddenly bursts out of him. “You just left! All of us!”

“I’m standing right in front of you,” Chuuya growls out.

“For the first in a month. Wow, Chuuya, thank you so much for gracing me with your presence!”

“I see the others as often as I can. Forgive me if I’m not in the mood to do the same with you when all you fucking do is talk shit.”

“Okay, fine, maybe I deserve that, but you know what? It doesn’t change the fact that you still left. I can see it. The sheep can see it. Only you can’t.”

“I told you —”

“That you see them as often as you can?! And why is that, huh?!” Luca cocks his head daringly. “Why is that you are the only one who can’t find the time?”

Chuuya lets the boxes drop with a bit too much force in the truck before forcing out a breath through his teeth. “I’m trying to find out as much I can while I have the chance.”

“Find out *what?!* What are you trying to find out?”

“Why we’re here! And how to leave without ending up in a body bag!”

“I’ll tell you why we’re here,” Luca whisper-snaps. “Because we were a thorn in the mafia’s eye. We raided their shipments. We killed their men. We slowed them down. *That’s* why.”

“They could have just killed us. They didn’t have to go through the ordeal of arranging this alliance and giving us jobs.” There is more to it. There has to be.

But Luca looks at him like Chuuya is the one who goes around believing everything he hears on the streets. “You’re seriously that blind?”

Chuuya responds with a cold glare.

“They didn’t kill us because getting us to work for them is much more profitable.” And then he adds, “*you* are much more profitable to him alive and working than dead. Profit, Chuuya. That’s what this is about

it. That's all you are."

The words leave an icy trail of frost around Chuuya's lungs. It's not like Luca isn't wrong. For the first time in a while, what he says actually makes sense. Chuuya — no, his ability wielded by the port mafia instead of against them *is* the strategically smarter choice. And if that means getting all of the sheep in the same boat… and giving them jobs, not big or important enough to risk anything but only keep them here, then that's exactly what the port mafia would have done. What Dazai would have.

But…

Why all the lessons? The truths? The *wine?* Why the deals? Why bother to invest so much time and effort into him just to keep him here for *profit* when the port mafia is already powerful enough on its own without him? When Dazai doesn't even *care* about profit?

"Chuuya," Luca says, closer now than he was before, "please tell me you can see what I mean. You're not that naive. I know you aren't."

"Suppose you are right —" The words scrape against the roof of his mouth, tasting like metal and blood. "— and it's been about that all along. What do you suggest we do?" Chuuya's teeth hurt with how hard he clenches his jaw. "We're still stuck here."

"You have to kill him."

"And then the mafia kills all of you." Chuuya shakes his head. "You want that? Because I don't."

"Not if we slip away in the chaos that ensues," Luca argues. "Or, even before that. What do you think all these criminals will care more about, finding us or fighting about who gets to be the next boss?"

"I think you don't realize how much power Dazai wields. If I kill him — and that's a big if, because by now, he probably already has a thousand plans to prevent that from happening — his people *will* find us, and they will get their revenge."

"See? I knew it." Throwing up his hands, Luca lets out a scoff and turns around, the disappointment glaring in every line of his body. "You don't want him dead." Chuuya suppresses a snarl, but Luca beats him to an answer. "You don't even want to leave. No wonder you have no time for us anymore."

“Just because I think your plan sucks doesn’t mean I don’t want this just as much as —”

“It does! It doesn’t matter what anyone suggests, you would find a way to shoot it down —”

“I’m not going to fucking apologize for being careful and wanting something more solid than just a simple-minded *let’s kill him* approach!”

“You didn’t mind working with my *simple-minded* plans before — which always worked out, in case you forgot!”

“That was different,” Chuuya snaps. “Robbing a gas station is different than murdering the head of the biggest crime syndicate in the entire prefecture! Why can’t you see that?!”

Even the sheep’s biggest conflict with a child trafficking organization two years ago looks like a fight with sticks and stones compared to what a battle against the port mafia would have to be like.

“You want to know what I see? I see you being *manipulated.* I see you doing exactly what that man wants you to do. I see you trying so hard to find a reason to keep him alive even though he would let all of us *and* you die in a second if it came down to it, and the worst thing is that you think *I* am the bad guy even though all I’m trying to do is save you from him!”

“Save me?” Chuuya can’t help it; he laughs. “That’s rich coming from you.”

Luca takes another step closer. “Well, someone needs to! And I know I fucked up, but I’ve been trying to make up for it ever since! I am trying to do that right now because *somehow,* I still care about you. I still… I still fucking care about you, so open your damn eyes and realize that I’m just trying to help you.” He grabs Chuuya’s hand, and his fingers squeeze so desperately that it has to be honest. “Open your eyes and *come back.* Come back to us. To me.”

It’s been months since the last time Luca touched him like that, months since they sat on a rooftop and shared cigarettes and their fingers met every time they exchanged stolen, breathless kisses, not knowing it would be the last time before his girlfriend would strut into their bubble and pop it with sharp heels, and even sharper words, revealing that Luca still had a family that he saw on the weekends, a family and a girlfriend and a dog and a life outside of the streets, that

the sheep were just a temporary entertainment while he went through an identity crisis. It's been months since Chuuya allowed him to step this close again. And it's been a while since Luca even wanted to.

Months, but for a moment, it feels like Chuuya is right back on that rooftop, the smell of smoke and sweat in the air, the sun on his face, dirt under his nails, but seemingly happy and carefree for a few more hours before the day and the challenges it brings with it starts anew.

It's so vivid in his head it hurts, and then it's gone again like the flicker of a fleeting flame, and even though Chuuya can remember how he felt back then, there is nothing in him anymore that still does.

He slips out of Luca's grip. "I don't need you to save me. I only need you to stop pursuing silly ideas before you end up doing something that will endanger all of our friends."

"Is that a threat?"

Chuuya breathes out bitter laughter. "*No.* I'm asking you, Luca. If you really care about me, then give me, give all of us, a chance to come up with something that everyone agrees on."

"I don't want to fight with you anymore," Luca says, "but you're choosing the wrong side here, man."

There is nothing left to say that hasn't been already said, not when all Luca does is repeat his words over and over like a broken record. Chuuya shoots him one last look before turning away.

"You're the one who is endangering all of us!" he hears Luca yell after him. "And you will be the one who will ruin us! I warned you!"

***

"Is it possible to be attracted to someone you hate?"

Next to him, Yuan groans into her arms, where her face is buried. "Every single muscle in my body hurts — muscles that I didn't even know I have!"

"What am I saying," Chuuya mutters with a sigh. "Of course, it's possible. But is it possible to like someone while simultaneously not liking them? That's just absurd, right?"

"Maybe if I pretend I'm dead, I will get a day off… "

“Nevermind. It’s really not that deep. I don’t think it’s got anything to do with actual feelings. It’s just this weird… connection. And probably all the time we spend together. A circumstantial crush, if you will.”

“… unless this place here has an ability user for that. Oh my god. Imagine finally getting to die only for some asshole to bring you back. Did Dazai ever mention someone like that?”

At the mention of that name, Chuuya’s head snaps to his friend. “Huh? I’m not — I wasn’t talking about Dazai.”

“What?” Yuan wears the same expression that he feels swirl through him. “I have no idea what you’re mumbling about. Does the port mafia have an ability user who can bring back people from the dead?”

“Oh,” Chuuya says and lets out a breath, “not as far as I know. Who do you need to bring back?”

“Not me!”

“Then who does?”

Yuan squints, then lets out an exasperated sigh and buries her face in one of Chuuya’s pillows again. “You’re not making any sense, and I’m too tired to try to understand you right now. I just want to die in peace.”

Chuuya hums sympathetically. “Kouyou working you to the bone?”

The reply is a muffled grunt.

“What jobs have you been doing?”

She doesn’t respond at all this time, so Chuuya pokes her arm. Again, only silence.

“Hello? Stop ignoring me.”

She uncurls from her position to flip around and flop her arm over her forehead, shrugging listlessly. “Stuff.”

“Stuff,” he repeats, narrowing his eyes. “Maybe a bit more precise than that?”

“Just stuff, Chuuya! I don’t know!”

He looks at her for a moment before letting out an offended gasp. “Are

you *keeping* things from me?"

That earns him a stony look. "As if you tell me everything you do when you're with the boss."

"I…" Well, she has a point. Some things are too sensitive and too irrelevant to share with his friends, so he doesn't bother. But what could she be doing that is too sensitive to share with *him* when he will probably hear it from Dazai anyway? Sputtering for a few seconds, Chuuya finally settles on, "I'd bore you to death if I told you everything we do."

"See," she says easily, "same goes for me."

Wow. Just wow.

"Fine," he snaps half-heartedly and crosses his arms over his chest as he glares at the ceiling. "Keep your secrets then."

"Will you stop being mad if I tell you another secret?"

He contemplates ignoring her but ends up too curious for his own good. "What kind of secret?"

"A secret that will explain why Shirase has been acting so weird?"

"So I didn't imagine things! I fucking knew it," he exclaims, already turning back to her. "Tell me. What's his deal?"

Yuan wears a gleeful smirk around her lips as she meets his gaze. "Okay, but you didn't hear it from me, got it?"

"Why are you all hiding things from me?"

"Do you want to know or not?"

"Yes, just tell me."

"Okay, so remember that party that they threw right here in your apartment?"

Chuuya nods.

"Well, apparently… they had to cut it short because *the boss,*" she rolls the title over her lips, "you know, your Dazai, the man you spend all your time with, crashed the party in the middle of the night and forced them to clean up after themselves. He didn't let anyone leave

until this place was shiny."

Chuuya blinks. Then he blinks again. But somehow, the words don't really register.

After a moment of silence, Yuan pokes his forehead. "You still there?"

"He did *what*?"

"Mmm," Yuan agrees and stretches out her arms behind her head, "he did, he did. I wasn't there and only got vague details from Shirase, but it was brutal. He didn't hurt anyone, but it was pretty humiliating. So there you have it. Shirase has been acting weird because he's embarrassed."

"Oh."

"And you know, much as I wish to have been there because let's be honest, they kind of deserved that, there's one thing I don't understand." He feels her eyes land on him. "Where were you when this happened?"

Chuuya clears his throat but doesn't really feel like sharing secrets anymore.

"Chuuya… "

Pressing his lips together, he shakes his head.

"Chuuya, if you're having an affair with the boss of the port mafia, I need to know that."

"I am not having an affair with the boss of the port mafia," Chuuya tells her.

"Then where were you?"

His eyes fall closed. "In his bed…"

"Chuuya!"

"I'm not having an affair with him, I swear! I just — Shirase had puked into my bed. I was worried they would end up destroying the dragon egg, so I took it and…" He shrugs helplessly. "His office was the only place I could go at that time."

"Okay, I'm going to pretend I did not just hear that."

“And then he said I could crash there, and I wanted to go to the bathroom, but there was his cat, and I got distracted and somehow fell asleep in his bed.” Chuuya sniffs loudly. “See? No affair. Nothing.”

Yuan’s eyes are still narrowed. “Not even a kiss?”

“Nothing,” Chuuya repeats loudly.

“Okay. Then how do you explain that little scene in the gym a week ago?”

“We were sparring.”

“Right,” she agrees mockingly. “Just sparring. We used to spar, but somehow I never ended up on top of you, eye-fucking you in front of the entire gym.”

Chuuya makes a small noise in the back of his throat. “You have read too many books.” Not that he would know, but he imagines that terms like eye-fucking only fall there.

“Or maybe you have read too few,” she replies, “or you wouldn’t be acting like a blustering, oblivious idiot about it.”

“I’m not fucking oblivious. I just get enough crap from our friends as it is. Luca already thinks he has to save me like I’m some kind of helpless, naive idiot.”

“Save you?”

“His words.”

“This guy… he’s creative, I’ll give him that. I mean, he even accused me of being in love with you when I told him to shut up during one of his rants.”

Chuuya’s eyes almost bulge out of their sockets with surprise. “You? In love? With me?”

“Yes,” Yuan tells him, equally bewildered. “Don’t get me wrong, I love you, and you’re hot and all, but I think I would burst my guts laughing if I ever had to kiss your stupid face.” Then she points a warning finger at him. “Don’t say the wrong thing.”

“He’s gone insane,” Chuuya says instead, massaging his temple.

“He has. But if Luca wasn’t a problem, would you hit it then?” She

somehow manages to get back to the topic that Chuuya was trying to *end*. “Because I wouldn’t blame you, you know. He is terrifying and I’m pretty sure he’s evil but…” She nods almost dreamily. “Those sweatpants that he wore… I’m telling you, Chuuya, his dick is —”

“Please shut up.”

“— big,” she says. “*Humongous*.”

Groaning under his breath, Chuuya slides out of bed. “I am done with this conversation.”

“Oh, come on.” Yuan sighs and lets herself fall on the bed. “All I’m saying is that you can tell me if anything of this sort happens, so I will know where to go looking for you when you vanish one day.” Then her tone turns a bit more serious. “But I know how difficult Luca has been on you, so I understand. I do.”

“So you don’t think it’s as simple as killing Dazai or running either, right?”

She hums. “I don’t think it’s that simple at all. I don’t even know if it’s us versus them anymore because the things I have seen…” She trails off, but Chuuya feels like she is uttering the words that ran through his head when he first saw the man that was crucified. “I think you should do whatever you want while you still can. Besides, it’s just sex. You can fuck someone and still be wary of them. You can even use it to your advantage.”

Right. Just sex. Physical attraction. Human biology. Nothing more than that.

Except —

Except Dazai made his friends clean up his apartment. That pisses him off. It enrages him until the air he inhales and exhales burns red in his lungs. It wasn’t Dazai’s place to talk to them, no matter what intention he pursued. The sheep are not his touch. Never will be.

And yet, he never mentioned it. He could have. He could have used it to gloat, to give Chuuya an illustrated example of how awful his friends are and present himself like his damn knight in shining armor, but he never even uttered a word. And it makes everything that much more complicated.

Feeling a headache take root in the back of his head, born of too much

thinking and not enough doing, Chuuya finds the bundle of blankets where Kafka permanently resides and takes a seat in front of it. When in doubt, staring at a dragon egg will help. All your problems become tiny and meaningless when you find yourself face to face with something so… magical.

Chuuya traces a finger over the shell, wondering if any of his poking and prodding will ever do something or if the egg will remain an egg forever. Behind him, he hears the rustling of sheets.

“What are you doing?”

“Thinking.”

“About whether to fuck the boss?”

Chuuya clicks his tongue. “No.”

“Then what about?”

“Just thinking.”

“Well, think about how to get your best friend that you love very much a day off, so she won’t die and collapse in exhaustion.”

“Just ask Kouyou.”

“Are you insane?”

“What’s the worst that can happen? She’ll say no?”

“Uh, yeah?”

“Talk to her,” Chuuya mutters under his breath. *Just fucking talk.*

***

It’s been four days since he last saw Dazai, looking kind of tired and awkward in this exact elevator that is now taking Chuuya upstairs to the highest floor. At first, the order to take a break felt pitying and condescending, but then Chuuya entered his bedroom, that stupid dream flashing through his mind again, and maybe not having to see Dazai for would do good, after all.

Now he’s not so sure anymore because it’s been four days without seeing him or talking to him or feeling that unnerving tension whenever he is too close, and Chuuya feels more confused than ever,

the kind of confusion that rages through him like an ocean storm, the kind that makes his fingertips ache with violence. He hates being uncertain.

When the doors slide open, making way to the eerily empty and long hallway that will take him to Dazai, Chuuya takes a deep breath before stepping outside. Chances are he won't even get to talk to the man since he is here without reason. Dazai didn't call for him. He might be busy. He might not even be here. And yet, Chuuya only has to utter his name to the guards posted in front of his office, and they are already dragging open the heavy doors for him.

That pisses him off, too.

Is Dazai expecting this already? Is it another fucking move on his grand chessboard? Or is Chuuya's name written somewhere on a list of people who are always allowed to come to see him?

He starts to think it's the latter when he stalks inside and comes to an abrupt halt in front of the long table, occupied by several people. Several of them that he has never seen before. But the presence of both Kouyou and Ace, of executives, tells him this is a meeting for mafia echelons only. And Dazai, of course, who lifts his chin up from his folded hands just high enough to tilt his head, the only indication that he is even remotely surprised despite the glazen smile he flashes him.

"Chuuya. You're early."

Early?

Before Chuuya can question that, Dazai lets out a sigh and softly drums his fingers over the table surface. "That's all right. We were done here anyway." He inclines his head before his subordinates. Executives. Whatever. "Ladies and gentlemen."

Still somewhat puzzled, Chuuya watches the people around the table pay the same respect to Dazai and then rise to their feet, only the occasional murmur echoing through the rustling of movement. Chuuya catches Ace shoot a dirty look his way, but a hand grasping his arm, so careful it's more of a hover than an actual touch, makes him turn to Dazai instead, letting him lead them through his office as the noises behind them subside until the heavy thud of the door falling shut signals that they are alone.

"I guess I should have figured that Chuuya wouldn't be able to stay

away for more than a few days, being a hopeless workaholic and all." Dazai does this and that with his voice, a casual thrill that gets drowned out by the slam of Chuuya's heart, growing louder and louder in volume with each new word that comes out of his mouth. "I do hope Chuuya actually got some rest instead of using his free time to do more work, or I will be forced to prescribe him more vacation days, which is very hard on me, I'll have you know. It's quite boring to do everything on your own."

"You had no right."

Chuuya came here without much of a game plan of what to do or what to say, figuring it would come to him at the moment. Apparently, it's this. A whispered accusation that is louder than a scream.

Dazai pauses in front of the windows that he just uncovered. "Hm?"

"You had no right," he repeats, louder and firmer this time, "to go behind my back and order my friends around."

"Ah, so that's what this is about. I told your little lambs to clean up after themselves. That's hardly a crime, Chuuya."

"I could have done that myself."

"And I know that, but coming home to an apartment that's already cleaned up feels much better than finding all of your friends first and then making them do it, no?"

Chuuya makes sure to hold his gaze when he says, "this isn't my home."

Dazai gazes back at him silently, not a single muscle of his twitching, before Chuuya sees him visibly forcing himself to react somehow. To blink and offer a half-shrug. Except what has always seemed too composed and nonchalant looks stiff, off-kilter somehow, a creature trying to pose as human remembering what to do a few seconds too late. "Home. Apartment. Penthouse. Same thing."

"Stop doing that."

"Do what?"

"This!" Chuuya exclaims, waving his hand over him. "All of it! Just stop it!"

“I’m not doing anything,” Dazai says softly.

“Yes, you are! You let me come in here whenever I want and then act like you ordered me here so I won’t look stupid in front of everyone! You make the sheep clean up my apartment and never even say a fucking word! You…” Teeth baring, Chuuya balls his fingers into fists. “You let me sleep in your bed and pet your fucking cat and get me a freaking dragon egg just because I mention it once! That! I mean all of that! You have to stop!”

Dazai exhales a humorous laugh. “And being nice to you every once in a while is such a bad thing because…?”

His stupid chuckle is the final thing that pushes Chuuya over the edge. Snarling softly, he lunges forward and slams Dazai against the window behind him, his hand curling around his throat, wrapped in gauze and probably hiding absolutely nothing. Just a squeeze. That’s all it would take to crush his windpipe like the one a few days ago. That’s all it would take to kill the boss of the port mafia, to dethrone one of the most powerful men in the city, and to win back his friends. That’s all it would take because instead of defending himself or trying to get out of the chokehold, Dazai just…

He exhales and lets him.

If Chuuya actually tried to kill him right now, Dazai would let him.

And that’s unacceptable.

“Because,” Chuuya hisses, releasing enough force in his grip to allow air into Dazai’s lungs but still keep him pinned. “Because you’re not nice or good or kind. Because you forced me to marry you and join the mafia and isolated me from my friends until they started seeing me as an enemy only to act like they are the ones who are in the wrong. Because you can’t waltz into my life as the villain and then not play the fucking part!”

Dazai’s pulse point throbs against his skin. His lips part but the words only come out a few faint breaths later. “Is that what you want?” he scrapes out. “Me to play the villain?”

Chuuya shakes his head. No. He will hate Dazai whether he acts like a tyrant or a saint. Whether he uses his fingers to kill or to caress. Whether that mouth orders executions or… or not.

“I hate you,” he whispers to remind himself. “I hate you so much,

Dazai."

Chuuya hates him for forcing him into this position and refusing to tell him why. For being nothing like the man the streets have painted him out to be. For all his power games and lies and deceptions. For treating the rotten parts of Chuuya's heart more kindly than he treats himself.

Chuuya hates him for the dangerous thoughts he puts in his head.

Chuuya hates him.

But most of all, he hates Dazai for making it so damn hard to actually hate him. Of all the sins he has committed, this is by far the gravest one.

"I know."

Growling, Chuuya desperately tightens his grip around his throat.

Dazai has no right to know that. No right to understand. And no damn right to look so fucking peaceful being at Chuuya's mercy because it makes him want to test just how much blind and illogical trust Dazai is putting into his hand. It makes him want to squeeze and see the light seep out of his eyes or lean forward and press his lips against Dazai's to see whether they are just as cold as his hands or as feverishly warm as they were in his head. Whether Dazai would allow him to do with his mouth whatever he wants to or whether he would rob Chuuya of any control like he does with everything else.

Maybe he should. Maybe he needs to allow Dazai to make him sick one time to get it out of his system. He nearly does. A shaky breath slips out of him as he inches forward ever so slightly, and then –

Riiiiing.

Chuuya's eyes fall closed in time with the sag of his chest. His fingers spread, letting go of Dazai's throat. Whatever self-destructive, manic monster just drove him to almost kiss Dazai, or kill him, releases its grip on Chuuya to allow him to return to reality. A reality in which this cannot and will not ever happen.

Chuuya hisses out a breath and kicks the floor under their feet with so much irritation he leaves a dent. "I hate you!" he yells. It's hard to throw a temper tantrum in a barren office like this, so his only option really is to stomp to the desk and knock over files and books and

hurtle the stupid phone that starts ringing again against the wall, missing Dazai's slack-jawed, slightly flushed face by inches. "I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!"

"Chuuya –"

"No, shut up!" His arms raise only to crumple into fists when Dazai looks like that again. "Don't –" He bites down on his teeth so hard he thinks they might shatter. "Just don't."

And because as long as Dazai exists, he will — he will do whatever it is that he does to be who he is, Chuuya shoots him one final look of warning before he spins around and stalks away.

No.

Just *no.*

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter we have:
- an impulsive choice
- a punishment
- and an odd alliance

Chapter 12: Dark Waters

Chapter Notes

> HELLOOO, I bring a surprise early-ish update because I have too much written and I'm simply not patient enough to sit on it all on my own. Also, thank you SOOO much for 1000+ kudos and all the lovely comments!!! I see and appreciate all of you so much! I'll try my best to reply soon but I'm a mess with rocks for brains, so it might take me a while, my apologies!
>
> Warnings: vague mentions of torture, non-consensual drug use, and a big part of the chapter deals with Ace and the slaves he keeps.
>
> OH, AND AND AND: my wonderful friend Emily painted the skk from this fic and it's absolutely gorgeous! You should definitely check it out <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chuuya gives himself a day to cool off and get his shit together before doing anything else that involves *speaking* and *Dazai*. A day to stare at Kafka and hope for cosmic guidance. A day to trawl through his pantry for something edible that doesn't take long or a written recipe to cook. A day to sit down and pick up where he last left off in his studies, frowning at the exercises in the books and scribbling down characters that are a bit hard on the eyes but hopefully right.

However, the only thing he learns is how much he prefers to study with Dazai. Annoying he might be, but his explanations and instructions are always easy to follow. And maybe the occasional praising comments here and there motivate him to try harder.

Chuuya can't tell Dazai to stop acting a certain way, then do it himself, though. It has to go both ways.

The same night, the insistent ring of his phone yanks him out of his dreams. In the sleepy haze, he doesn't check the caller ID to see whether it's the combination of characters that he has memorized by now, automatically expecting to hear Dazai on the other end. It's not.

"Chuuya-kun, I hope you weren't sleeping." It's *Kouyou.* And while the words aren't technically reprimanding, her tone *is.* "You're needed for an urgent job at the docks. Please report to the armory as soon as

possible.”

“Right now?” he croaks out.

“Is that a problem?”

“No!” he exclaims, scrambling out of bed and almost tripping over a pair of boots on his way to the bathroom. “Not at all! Armory. Now. I’ll be there.”

“Good,” she says. “Don’t take too long.”

Chuuya rushes through his morning ritual, brushing his teeth *and* his hair with the help of his ability at the same time. Don’t get him wrong*, for the tainted sorrow* and he are a well-coordinated team, but… copying brushing movements is not the same as manipulating gravity to attack or defend. He ends up with a frizzy, horrid ponytail and wrinkly clothes, but the thought of being late is motivating enough to look past these blemishes.

While he was getting dressed, he managed to reach Karma to task him with calling and gathering the other four mafiosi in his squad. As he strides across the hall on the third floor and down to the armory, he is positively surprised to see that Karma actually did it. All five of them are already there and waiting for him. Some look a bit worse for the wear, but considering Chuuya isn’t better off, he can’t blame them.

He greets them with a simple nod before jerking his chin towards the door. “Follow me.”

Inside the armory, Kouyou is already expecting them. He has been here before, once, on his tour around the building on his first day, but getting only a glimpse, and standing here because he is actually going to make use of all the weapons have quite a different feel to it. Chuuya’s heart laughs like a giddy child that is about to get to play with new toys.

“Gear up,” Kouyou tells his subordinates before beckoning Chuuya closer with a look. “An armed group has got it into their heads to try and attack one of our shipments. People have been getting suspiciously bold lately. We had men stationed there, but they seem to have an ability user, so you will take care of it.”

It seems like a stupid question to ask, and he can already make out the answer, but Chuuya hasn’t had to deal with this kind of conflict before. “You want them dead or alive?”

“Leave two or three alive in case there is more of them.” Kouyou’s chin lifts ever so slightly as she gazes down at him, not having to say the rest.

Chuuya nods.

Not even one hour later, he is calling the clean-up crew and the extraction team to pick up the ability user, currently pinned to the ground by *for the tainted sorrow*. It turned out that it wasn’t a group of people, but just this one man with the gift to create duplicates of himself. He could have spent the rest of his life well taken care of with that kind of skill; instead he made the mistake of going against the port mafia. Now he will most likely not even live long enough to see the sun rise again.

Afterwards, Chuuya makes sure that everyone on his team is okay, which they are. All of them. There is something odd about the way Karma is staring out over the dark waters, though.

Chuuya contemplates ignoring it — whatever is bothering isn’t his business — but Karma, in one way or another, is part of his people now. He never chose to join the mafia. He never did anything to the sheep. He was thrust into this life, and, in the end, Chuuya used him for his own gains when he added him to his team. Just like everyone else. The least he can do now is ask.

“Hey, kid. You okay?”

Karma’s eyes are enormous and wide when he glances at him. He doesn’t look okay. “Yeah. I’m fine.”

Chuuya crosses his arms. “Really? Because if you’re hurt or if this was scary, then you’ve got to tell me.”

“I’m not the one that’s hurt.”

The others are all fine…

“Then who is?”

“I can’t…” His voice lowers to a frail whisper that’s barely audible over the howling of the wind. “I can’t tell you that, Nakahara-san.”

Now that makes Chuuya’s eyes narrow suspiciously because no one in his right mind would admit to a secret. It’s got to be something in-between.

“Karma,” he says. “Did something happen? Did *you* do something?”

“I didn’t! You don’t have to worry about that.”

“I’m not worried about anything except the thing that’s clearly bothering you right now. Come on, spit it out. Maybe I can help.”

A flicker of something hopeful flashes in Karma’s eyes before he visibly stomps it out again and looks away. “You can’t. It might get you in trouble, and after what you did for me, I can’t do that to you. Please, Nakahara-san, just… I can’t tell you.”

Sighing, Chuuya places his hands on his hips. He gives Karma a moment to collect himself before forcing him to meets his gaze again. “Look, you have two choices here. Either you keep quiet and continue feeling like…” He jerks his chin towards him. “... this. Maybe you will try to fix the problem on your own, and I’m telling you now, that will get us both in trouble because I’m responsible for you. Or, you tell me, and we can see if we can do something together. No one will get in trouble if no one finds out.”

Another minute passes, filled only with the noises of night-wind and the steady rippling of water.

“It’s my friend,” Karma blurts out then, looking up at Chuuya. “Ruby. She’s dying.”

Chuuya frowns. “What happened to her?”

“I-I don’t know. She got sick a lot when I was still working for the master, and she always got better after a while, but she’s not getting better now!” He pauses and his chin dips to his chest, eyes fluttering to lock on anything but on Chuuya. “We once managed to smuggle phones into our rooms. I still have mine. That’s how I talk to them. My friends. And they’re saying that it’s bad. She’s not eating. She… she will die, and the master won’t do anything to help her. He never does.”

Well, shit.

Ace is complicated territory. He remembers Dazai once saying that getting rid of him, an executive, was a delicate matter that he would like to avoid for now. This means that the people working for the man — no, the kids are also complicated territory.

But that’s the point.

They're kids.

And one of them is dying.

Complicated territory or not.

"Do you know where your friends are?"

Karma nods.

"Somewhere at the base? In one of the towers?" Chuuya guesses.

But Karma shakes his head and turns to point out at sea instead. "They're out there."

Chuuya's brow furrow, confusion flooding him. "Out on the sea?"

"On a ship," Karma elaborates. "The master let everyone believe he works from the headquarters, but he doesn't. It's a ship out on the sea. He always took one or two of us with him when he went back to the base or somewhere else, so we could… assist him. That's why I was there at that meeting."

An entire lair just for himself. A lair that's impossible to escape without a boat.

Chuuya's fingers drum against his hips as he looks in the direction Karma pointed at, not really seeing anything but the dark night. Then he turns back to the boy. "You think you could find it?"

"I… the master let me steer the boat sometimes. I think so."

"Even at night?" Chuuya questions.

"If I have to," Karma says, "I will, but Nakahara-san… we don't have a boat and — there are so many guards. It's impossible to escape, so getting in will not be any easier!"

"I'm not saying it will be easy, but if your friend is dying… we will take care of that when we get there." He lets out a breath then. "Stay here. I'll send our team home, and as soon as I'm done, I'll figure out how we're going to do this. Good?"

"Yes! Okay. N-Nakahara-san!" Chuuya pauses to look over his shoulder. "Thank you!"

Chuuya's smile is thin. "Don't thank me just yet."

***

Once the ability user is picked up and his crew sent back home, Chuuya takes a moment to consider his options here. Realistically, going to someone's secret lair alone, with only a fifteen-year-old boy by his side, is a stupid idea. Like, epically, cosmically stupid even for him. But his other choices don't look too good right now either. Asking the sheep for help would only endanger them. Approaching Kouyou would probably result in a hard *no* — not to mention that she would stop him for the sake of mafia politics. And Dazai…

Somehow Chuuya can imagine Dazai getting on board — in exchange for another deal, of course. But he *would* help or, at least, let Chuuya lead the rescue mission — because that's how twisted and obscure their relationship has become. Right now, though, he isn't in the mood to ask Dazai for another favor. He doesn't need Dazai to step in and be illogically merciful and kind and whatnot. He needs Dazai to stay on his throne and be the lawless, unforgiving mafia boss that he is supposed to be. Not anything else, and certainly not *kind*.

So a two-man army it is.

The only problem that remains is finding a boat. While Chuuya could take on the journey with his ability alone, he would feel safer if they had a ship to rely on. Just in case.

Well, it's a port for a reason. There are plenty of those as far as the eye can see.

When he jogs back to where he left Karma, the boy is sitting on the curb and dribbling his leg up and down, though his head snaps up at his arrival.

"So," Chuuya says, letting out a breath, "you up for stealing a boat?"

****

"Man, you weren't lying when you said it would be hard to miss."

It would be an honest understatement to call Ace's lair a *ship*. It's not. It's a goddamn castle on water. It looks more like the *titanic* than the image that popped up in his head when Karma told him about it.

Okay, Chuuya might be exaggerating a tiny bit, but it *is* the most giant ship he has ever seen so up close.

Karma nods grimly as he stares at the thing in the near distance. No amount of twinkling lights and luxuries could probably make up for the things he must have lived through in that glorified prison.

“Tell me again,” Chuuya whispers. “How many guards are usually stationed on deck?”

“There always three on watch outside. Ten on the first floor inside. And twelve in the basement… depending on where the master wants us.”

“The rest are in their cabins and sleeping,” Chuuya repeats just to make sure.

“Yes.”

“Your friend?”

“She was in her room the last time I talked to my friend…” Karma trails off and rubs a hand over his arm, probably worried since their attempt to reach out to his friends ten minutes ago went unanswered. Though it’s not convenient, it’s also way too late to turn back now. “But she has been sleeping all this time. I can’t imagine that she went anywhere.”

Unless they’re too late, and she’s already dead.

Chuuya shoves that possibility aside for now.

Their biggest problem is something else entirely anyway: the collars. Apparently, those weren’t a bold fashion choice or a symbolic means of claiming your slaves. No, according to Karma, they are the very things that keep Ace’s fifty-man army in check since the man quite literally has the life of every person who wears it in his hands. One snap of his fingers, and he can turn someone’s life into gems. Taking it off supposedly doesn’t work either. But Karma used to wear one, and now his neck is free of any life-threatening collars, so Chuuya suspects that’s just something Ace told his slaves to keep them scared and obedient. In any case, there are very few things in this world that don’t obey the law of gravity. He desperately hopes the collars aren’t an exception.

“Okay,” Chuuya says with his gaze narrowed on their destination, “we’ll do it like this: first –”

He uses his ability to rise high above, and observe the situation on

deck – three guards, just as Karma predicted. Then he bolts down, knocking out one after the other as quick as lightning without ever losing momentum or giving them the time to realize that they're under attack.

Once all three of them are slumped on the ground and gagged, Chuuya reaches down with his hand and touches a collar, decreasing its mass so it will be light enough to break. His ability glows red, but the steel remains impact.

Shit.

Chuuya curses softly under his breath before rising back to his height and sprinting off the ship so he can get Karma – who is already waiting for him with an expression that's oozing nerves.

"Good news and bad news," he says in favor of a greeting. "The men are taken care of, but I couldn't take off their collars."

"So Ace was right," Karma mutters. "He always said the only way out of them was death…"

"You don't look dead to me."

"The boss… I don't know how he did it, but when he touched it, the collar just fell off."

Dazai, huh?

Chuuya has been wondering whether his ability could have something to do with affecting other abilities. Weakening them. Or nullifying them altogether. It makes more and more sense with each new scrap of information. Unfortunately, it's useless at this very moment because Dazai isn't here, which means they will have to speed against time to get the kid to Dazai before Ace notices her absence and kills her.

"Did he ever say anything else?" Chuuya wants to know when he kneels down and taps his back. "Hop on. I'll get us on the boat."

He feels Karma's reluctance as he climbs on his back, breath stuttering when Chuuya shoots off the boat and into the air. "Like what?"

"Anything that could help us take it off without the help of the boss right now." They land in the shadows of the deck, not visible to anyone outside or inside if someone gazed out. "There has to be some kind of limit. A restriction somehow. Or else, his ability would be too

powerful."

"You're not exactly powerless yourself," Karma points out quietly, and there is an edge to his voice that Chuuya hasn't heard before. Fear, nerves, gratitude, uncertainty – the boy has been full of those, but now there's a note of jealousy. Of bitterness. Of someone who knows a thing or two about being actually powerless. It's fleeting, though, flickering out like the flame of a candle. Karma lowers his head. "Sorry, Nakahara-san."

"You do have a point." Because it's the truth. When it comes to physical power, he guesses he should count himself lucky to have been gifted with the ability to manipulate gravity. "But it didn't come without a price," he adds. "Trust me."

The price of a life he never had, a family that he isn't even sure ever existed, and the price of an identity that wasn't manufactured and created by someone else. An identity that is real. Human.

Humans have limitations.

Chuuya's ability doesn't.

Karma looks at him for a moment, then he nods. "I… I don't really remember the day I got the collar, but something I've noticed with other people is that… he always asks first."

"He asks first," Chuuya echoes with furrowed brows. "You think his ability only works if he gets people's consent first?"

"I mean.. he doesn't really leave them much of a choice when the other options are even worse than the collar," the boy mumbles, "but I've never seen him put the collar on anyone without their agreement first either."

It has to be consent. It certainly would be a limitation even if the reality shows that it's still pretty easy to override it and find loopholes. That's just how abilities function.

"Maybe it works the other way around as well."

"You really think so?"

"I have to, or else, all of this will be in vain." Chuuya lets out a breath. "Stay here while I deal with the guards inside. As soon as I'm done, I'll open the door, and then you'll lead me to Ruby, okay?"

Another nod.

Again, it's a question of knocking everyone unconscious with as little fuss as possible, so the guards in the basement will not get any wind of what's happening up here.

Chuuya moves in the shadows until he can get a glimpse inside. He sees four guards patrolling a grand, marble staircase. The others are probably spread out over the entire floor. It won't be as easy as the other men, but Chuuya wouldn't be himself if he didn't like a good challenge.

Grabbing the door handle, he lets his ability work until he can open it, keys or not. He pauses and waits until the men inside are in a somewhat decent formation that he can work with. Then it's show-time.

Two of their heads snap towards him when he lets it fly open. They only have time to widen their eyes before he sprints past them, bounces off the wall, and disables them with a precise touch to their pulse point, letting them slump to the shiny floors with a thud that's only audible to the people on this level but not to anyone above or below. Chuuya doubts anyone would risk Ace's discontent by alerting him to something they're not even sure of, so they will check first and come here where Chuuya will be waiting for them.

It's a calculated risk, but it pays off.

One after the other comes running, and all of them end up in the same position as their fellow guardsmen: unconscious and on the floor.

Chuuya kicks the door open. A few seconds later, Karma comes hurrying inside, but when he gets a glimpse of the people, his expression falters.

"Problem?" Chuuya asks.

"That's… that's Eiji." Karma gazes down at a young guy's body. "He's my friend, too."

Right. It's easy to forget that they're, in fact, not their enemies in the heat of the mission, but that they were forced to be here just like Karma and everyone else.

"He isn't dead," Chuuya says. "Just unconscious. Now c'mon. Where to?"

“This way,” Karma murmurs and leads them down the staircase.

“Will there be more guards?”

“One, but y-you don’t have to worry about him. Kita is the friend I talked to on the phone. He won’t say anything.”

“You sure? 100% sure?”

“Yeah! Really!”

Chuuya is probably the last one with the right to judge others’ dangerous loyalties, but it’s still a risk. One wrong word to Ace, and they are all screwed.

Downstairs, Karma takes a sharp turn and jogs down a narrow hallway, then another, before they come to a stop in front of a rusty door. He pushes it open, and the sheer difference of this dust-covered, dark hallway from the lavish deck with marble floors, leather couches, and most likely toilet seats that are covered in diamonds – all of them *empty* – would baffle Chuuya if he didn’t know any better. As it is, a guard in a simple hoodie and pants snaps his head up when he sees them, eyes widening.

“*Karma?!”*

“Ruby,” Karma breathes out in reply. “Is she…?”

The guy, Kita, jerks his head towards the door he is guarding before he returns his stare back to the two of them. “It isn’t looking good, but – what are you – how…?”

“Get your friend,” Chuuya tells Karma, then leans against the wall and shoves his hands in the pockets of his slacks. “You’re going to cause problems?”

“Huh?! Me?”

“You see anyone else here?”

“N-No, I don’t want her to die either!” he hisses before taking a step closer. “How did you get in?! How are you planning to get *out?!* And what I’m going to tell the master when he finds out that I – I –”

“I need to try something,” Chuuya cuts in, “and for that, you’ll have to shut up for a moment and let me touch your collar.”

Kita's mouth instantly closes. His forehead is full of doubtful wrinkles but he doesn't tell Chuuya to stop either.

After a quick prayer to whatever gods might be residing up there, Chuuya reaches out to touch the collar. Again, his ability doesn't affect it. But…

"Do you want to take it off?"

"What?"

"Do you want that thing off? Do you want to withdraw your life out of Ace's hands?!"

"Y-yeah?"

"Say it."

"I-I want to take off this collar…"

Suddenly the red glow *of for the tainted sorrow* leaps over, latches onto the steel of the collar and burns brightly as its mass decreases. All Chuuya has to do is tug at it, and it cracks open, falling to the floor.

Chuuya can't help but grin. "Would you look at that, huh?"

The guy's eyes grow so big in size they look like they're going to bulge out of his skull at any moment. Blinking, he touches his neck, looks at the broken collar, and then Chuuya. "What…"

"You don't have to tell Ace anything anymore."

Whether it's one person that goes missing or two… it doesn't matter, right?

Semantics.

Except that the door springs open and –

Chuuya realizes that he might have made a mistake.

Because staring at him are a few dozen eyes. All of them miserable. All of them young. Too damn young for this kind of shit life.

"Nakahara-san," Karma murmurs with a tiny, dark-haired girl cradled in his arms, her skin ashen and frail. "Is there any way that we could… save them all?"

Is there? Yeah.

Does it make everything 10 times more complicated and likely to fail? Definitely.

Is Chuuya still going to do it? Apparently.

It was a foolish mistake to think they could have only come here to get one from the start – *Chuuya's* mistake that he chose to ignore when he agreed to help. Firefighters don't enter a burning house to save only one of the twenty trapped people. It's just not something you do.

Sighing, he pinches the bridge of his nose. "Fine, whatever, but tell your friends to be quiet and fast or they'll get left behind, got it?" After a hurried nod, Chuuya waves them over. "I'll remove all of your collars first, but then we have to get going. We already spent too much time talking anyway."

Whether it's the adrenaline or the danger of the situation, all thirteen of them are quick to understand Chuuya's instructions as he breaks one collar after another so that they are ready to depart soon after. Chuuya checks in with Kita, who has a radio to see whether anything has been reported over the line. There hasn't.

With Chuuya on the front and Karma bringing up the rear of the group, they march down the hallways and up the stairs back to the deck. It's only when they are finally outside that he notices it.

The sound.

The sound of water rushing.

Chuuya runs to the railing, and he's right –

A boat is heading straight towards them, and there are only so many people it could be holding.

"Okay," he says, both to himself and the small army of kids behind him. *It will be fine. Somehow*. "You," he jerks his chin towards the ones who look the oldest, "take the emergency boats and get everyone inside them. I'll bring 'em down. Hurry."

Because if Ace knows, then they're about to get company.

As soon as the thought crosses his mind, he sees a bunch of guards sprint up the stairs from the inside. He's still directing the kids to stick

to the shadows against the walls when the firing starts.

It's chaos.

Chuuya deflects the bullets that come his way, not caring anymore where they land as long as it's away from his people, but that only helps so much. Glass shatters everywhere. Sobs of fear and panic ring through the air. More shooting.

And then one particular – one *familiar* voice comes from below.

"You're all a bunch of idiots! I said get the ability user!"

Chuuya's heart slams wildly in his ears as he helps the last person off Ace's ship – Karma, who spins back to him with wide, terrified eyes when Chuuya forces the emergency boat to break away and hover in the air. "What about you, Nakahara-san?!"

"I'll get done here and catch up," he breathes out, drops of sweat rolling over his forehead as he concentrates. Changing the gravity of the people he attacks is different than this – it doesn't require precision and careful calculations because one wrong move could land all of them into the cold, ruthless water where they would most likely drown, it just requires his enemies disabled.

"But –"

"Just get everyone to safety," he snaps, and then Karma and the others are already gone. For a moment, he worries that he did it too quickly, too clumsily, but when he looks down, they're all fine. A few of them are already grabbing paddles. Karma glances up at him.

Chuuya's chest sags with a breath. This is barely the time to relax now. Ace is coming, but if he is quick, the man won't even manage to get on board. Chuuya just has to –

A sickly sweet scent appears in the air around him. First only a hint of it, then it's like a cloud of smoke that invades his nostrils and every other cell in his body, making it impossible to breathe. .

The strangest thing happens as Chuuya staggers back, clutching his throat and gasping for air. He wants to laugh. His lungs are shuddering with the lack of air and he feels irrationally *happy*.

Then everything stops.

***

Chuuya's apartment is empty.

Dazai folds his arms over his chest as he scans the room.

Chuuya isn't picking up his phone. Chuuya isn't here. And Chuuya's apartment is empty.

There is nothing inherently alarming about these observations, coupled with the little temper tantrum that Chuuya threw two days ago. Dazai himself thought it best if he took another few days off, at least from *him*, which is why he handed Chuuya off to Kouyou for a while, but now Dazai needs to see him, and Chuuya is nowhere to be found, and it makes everything so terribly irritating.

For the first time in years, Dazai finds himself regretting something.

Usually, he doesn't waste his time with the past – a useless pawn that clings to you like a stray puppy in the rain because it knows it's about to get left behind. The future – that's his best friend. The future holds all the cards, possibilities, and answers to his questions. The future is the hot girl at the party that everybody wants.

But at this very moment, Dazai might as well let the past put a ring on his finger, what with the way he oozes regret over the fact that Chuuya is the only person that he didn't bother to keep tabs on. Not only because Dazai knows he would end up with a fist in his face – and Chuuya's blows hurt – but because he finds it much more exciting playing the guessing game with him. Well, and because he barely needs to guess anything since he made it a habit to occupy most of Chuuya's time anyway. If he had made sure to be informed about every step that Chuuya takes, he would know where to find him right now. As it is, he is standing in his empty apartment and holding long, silent conversations with himself.

Dazai turns around, snags his phone out of his pocket, and presses it to his ear after tapping a number. "Gin darling," he says after a moment, "send Chuuya's friend, the Yuan girl, into my office, will you?"

***

Twenty minutes later, he hears the tell-tale sound of doors being opened before two of his guards escort Yuan to his desk – followed by Kouyou, who Dazai didn't order here but doesn't mind seeing either.

She might be of use as well.

When the two women come to a stop in front of him, he sees Kouyou tap the rookie's shoulder, her brows tugging into a frown, then flattening into a neutral expression again. "Yuan here… boss. You called for me?"

Dazai interlaces his fingers and looks at her.

Yuan stares back. First, confused, her eyes wide in the silence of the room. The longer it stretches on, though, the more irritated she gets, all while obeying Kouyou's silent order to behave.

In the end, it's also Kouyou who breaks the silence. "Boss, you ordered this one here," she says as if she has to remind him of that fact.

Flicking a hand towards Yuan, Dazai narrows his eyes. "Chuuya."

"Uh," her head tilts, "Chuuya…?"

"Did you see him today?"

"No. Should I have?"

"I'm asking the questions here."

"You're looking for Chuuya?" Kouyou asks.

And that somehow obliterates all of the lessons she probably must have drilled into Yuan. "Chuuya is missing?!"

"When did you last see him?" Dazai demands, ignoring her panicked stare.

"I don't know. Two days ago? In the afternoon?"

Then Dazai's gaze slides to Kouyou.

"I sent him to the docks last night. He reported afterwards."

"In person?"

"Over the phone."

Dazai's finger drums against his desk in irritation. "You didn't see him afterwards?"

“Not since then, no.”

“Fine. You can leave.”

Kouyou nods, attempting to take Yuan with her, but her little underling shakes her head in bewilderment. “I’m not going anywhere if Chuuya is missing.”

“Yu-Kun,” Kouyou warns.

“I’m sorry, but that’s my best friend!”

“And what do you think you could do about it?” Dazai cocks his head in curiosity. “Annoy the universe into making him reappear?”

Her face twists into an angry scowl. “I spent the last ten years of my life living with him. I know things about him that could help.”

Dazai’s mouth twitches. “Oh, yeah, like what?”

“Like I’m just going to tell you!”

“Okay,” Dazai says and gestures for Kouyou to collect her little project and get it out o of his sight, “so leave.”

Yuan looks downright offended. “We want the same thing! Finding Chuuya! Why can’t you just let me help?”

“Because I don’t need your help.”

“Then why did you call for me?”

Answering such a self-evident question is not worth his time, so Dazai slides his gaze towards Kouyou to make his orders clear. *Leave* means *leave*. Nothing more and nothing less.

Yuan beats her to it. Again. “We have a signal call!” she blurts out and pulls his non-existent attention span back to her. “Whenever some of us disappeared, we had a signal that we could use to find them.”

Dazai’s eye only hardens by the seconds, but in the end, he surprises even himself when he says, “fine.”

Not because he thinks a signal call is what is going to help here but for the simple fact that Yuan is one of the lambs, and there is nothing more important to Chuuya than his sheep. If anything, *she* will be the signal.

Chapter End Notes

This entire Ace thing was supposed to be one chapter but it was hugeee, so I had to split it into three, which means the other two chapters shouldn't take too long either!

Next up we have:
- a promise
- a threat
- and a decision

Chapter 13: Clutch of Greed

Chapter Notes

> Warnings: graphic descriptions of torture, electrocution, mentions of sex trafficking

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first thing Chuuya notices is the lonesome drop of water somewhere. The second is that everything is dark and foggy, stuffed full of cotton: his head, his thoughts, his mouth, even his limbs… trying to open his eyes feels like wading through water.

When his lids manage to flutter open, ugly green and shit-colored lights flood the room, and he clamps them shut again.

“You’re finally awake, huh?”

That seems to finally trigger some kind of survivor’s instinct in him. Chuuya’s eyes fly open at the same time as he strains against the restraining all around his body, tying him to a chair – to no avail.

“I must say for such a powerful ability-user, you’re pretty reactive to a little gas. I was already starting to worry you wouldn’t wake up anymore when I got here this morning.” Although the source of the voice isn’t hard to recognize, Chuuya still has to swallow around a knot in his throat when Ace comes into view behind bars.

He’s keeping him in a cell. Probably somewhere still on the ship. But that’s fine. It’s fine. Chuuya just has to call for his ability and –

Despite having had to experience this already quite a few times, the sensation is still shocking enough to take his breath away.

For the tainted sorrow isn’t responding. He can feel the heat of it deep inside his veins, feels the shape and the taste and the colors, but it’s like someone cut through a cord, and now the connection is lost. His ability is here, but he can’t use it.

Ace must notice his useless struggle as his sneer only widens. “Don’t bother trying to use your ability. Down here, it’s just you and me.”

Albatross once said that the mafia has ability-nullifying handcuffs. Apparently, Ace has them as well.

“So, imagine my surprise,” Ace continues, walking up and down the length of the cell, “when I’m in my casino, working, and suddenly my ship’s system notifies me that I have an ability user on deck. Odd, I think, since I would have probably remembered if I had invited someone to this very secret, unknown hideout. Now imagine my even bigger surprise when I found out that it was Nakahara Chuuya! King of the goats or whatever! That teenager’s latest toy to play with.” He stops then to gaze directly at Chuuya. “So, as the host, I have the right to ask. What brings you here? Surely it wasn’t just to save those useless subordinates of mine. Even someone like you can’t be this inane.”

Chuuya shrugs as far as the restraints allow him to do so. “Decided to go on a cruise.”

“So brave and funny,” Ace murmurs. “Don’t worry. That won’t last for long.”

“Well, your ship sucks,” Chuuya retorts wryly, “so thanks, but no thanks.”

“I’m afraid the length of your visit is not up to you anymore.”

“I doubt it’s up to you either.”

Karma and the others managed to escape, right? They will have to tell someone what happened when it becomes clear that Chuuya never caught up with them. Right?

Even from a few feet away, he sees Ace’s brows rise. “You think someone will rescue you? You think anyone cares?” A taunting chuckle echoes through the cold room. “Never mind that you assume you’re important enough to anyone in the port mafia. You also think that anyone will be able to find you! It’s a ship. Do you know what ships do?” The bastard doesn’t let him speak, obviously. “Ships move. I’m not certain the education you received on the streets covered that, but ships don’t stay in one place, and right now, the only one who knows where you are in me and the captain who is indebted to me and would rather slit his own throat than betray me.” His smile drops suddenly, eyes losing all the manic delight in them. “This isn’t a vacation, *king of the sheep*. This is your life.”

Chuuya’s not going to pretend and say that the thought of being stuck with this maniac somewhere out on the sea where no one will be able to find them doesn’t make the hairs on the back of his neck stand. It does. Even worse is the sickening feeling of deja-vu that pulses

through him.

Being captured. Powerless. Alone. Someone's *object.* Things he doesn't remember, not really, but things that have engraved themselves deep into his bones, always there, always with him.

But these are only thoughts — a few of his deepest fear combined with slices of reality and creating something ugly and frightened. The entire truth is that nothing is ever set in stone. There is always a chance to fight back, even if the possibility of success is so small that one thinks it's not worth trying at all. Something can always be done.

Chuuya's only powerless for as long as he is tied to this chair, and if Ace truly plans to keep him, he will have to let him go eventually. Fuck *for the tainted sorrow*; there is a reason why he fights with his legs most of the time. He knew relying on his ability only would get him in trouble eventually, so he trained himself out of it. He's not a small, helpless child anymore. He isn't anyone's experiment. And he certainly is not going to spend the rest of his life wasting away in someone's basement.

That's when Ace decides to slide keys into the lock of the cell, open the rusty, screeching doors and step inside. "I'm sure you're already thinking of all the ways you could kill me. Right?" His eyes sail towards Chuuya before he disappears somewhere behind him, out of his field of vision. The only hints giving away what he's doing are the sound of jingling keys and clashing steel. "But don't worry, I'll take care of that, too."

Chuuya frowns, tries to look over his shoulder but the feeling of something cold and metallic sliding around his neck beats him to it. It clicks shut with a resolute snap.

"I saw the footage of you eagerly snapping open my collars," he hears Ace's voice right in his ear, "so I'm not going to waste both of our time asking you to put it on. Not right now. That's why I have another one for you since you seem to be so fond of them anyway."

Chuuya's stomach unclenches in relief when Ace steps away – even if the ire gleam in his eyes promises anything but something good.

"I have this theory," he goes on, "that all wild things desire to be tamed at the end of the day. Look at you. A half-wild beast that can't go a second without snapping your fangs. And yet you love parading yourself around with a collar, don't you? You pretend you don't want it, but you do. You all do."

“You’re sick in the head,” Chuuya says.

The back of Ace’s hand lashes out before he can even blink, the force of it letting his head snap to the side.

He slapped Chuuya.

He fucking slapped him.

Like Chuuya really is just some inferior, mindless animal to tame.

“You’re scared of the truth, so you reject it and call it names.” Ace lets out a loud sigh and shakes his head. “That’s because no one took the time and effort to train you before. Now you have me, Chuuya. I will gladly become your master. I will physically carve the disobedience out of you.”

Chuuya tastes iron blood on his lips when he starts laughing quietly. “You should hear yourself speak,” he murmurs between breaths. “It’s really pathetic.”

This time, it’s not a slap.

It’s the push of a button. It’s thousand searing, sharp, and shocking needles stabbing his neck all at once. It’s his vision flickering into blackness with only the occasional white strobes thundering all around him. It’s the sound of mechanical crackling and his own choked-off rasps. It’s the smell of burning flesh.

It’s the heavy layer of pain that drapes over him like a second layer of skin when it stops, and Chuuya’s head falls forward, chest heaving with breaths that just won’t come through because everything *hurts*. His ears are ringing. Vision flickering on and off. His muscles feel like they’ve just been fried. And his stomach –

His stomach cramps around itself, and in the next moment, its entire contents seem to come out with a violent urgency that leaves Chuuya clinging to any shred of control over his body.

After he stops retching – after there is nothing left inside him aside from acid – he feels fingers tangle in his hair. They don’t yank him up, though. Instead, the hand pushes himself further down, forcing him to look at his vomit.

“Look at it,” Ace tells him. “This is how I’m going to carve the wild animal out of you and make you into something worthwhile. Piece by

piece until you learn your place. Until you realize that in this world, you're either a master or his servant, and you, Chuuya, you're no king."

Then his fingers start tugging, so hard Chuuya thinks he's going to rip out the roots of his hair entirely and make him look into his eyes. "What did you come here for?"

"Fuck you," Chuuya breathes out.

The pressure on his scalp disappears, making Chuuya slump forward again. He is more prepared this time, but it doesn't make it hurt any less when the shock collar around his neck goes off again – if not worse, because of the wounds already there.

His teeth grit together, and he tries to cling to whatever tiny amount of control he still has as everything else slips out of his grip – tears, sweat, spit, muscle regulation, and things he can't think about right now.

The electricity stops again, and Chuuya lets out a garbled gasp. Relief and the aftershocks of pain mix and make even the absence of it unbearable because even though being electro-shocked sucks, the minutes afterwards are even worse. Every muscle in his body feels cut open and raw, hypersensitive to even a flutter of breath ghosting over the skin. He needs to breathe to stop the unbearable pressure in his lungs and his throat, but he feels like he might die if he moves too much.

Somewhere in front of him, metal clinks with weight.

"You know, I was extremely disappointed to find half of my army gone when I came back here. I gave these good-for-nothing brats so much of my time, effort, and wisdom. I gave them a *purpose.* A reason to live instead of wasting away on the streets or dying at the hands of a greedy old man. And that's how they repay me? They all leave at the first chance to break free and become the wild animals that I tried so hard to train out of them?"

Footsteps.

"But now that I'm looking at you, I'm starting to wonder whether it might have been a blessing in disguise."

Chuuya's lids flutter in exhaustion as Ace squats down to his eye level.

“I don’t need an army if I have you,” he says. “You are an unrefined diamond right now, practically worthless, but once I’m done with you… you will be able to conquer countries for me just for a pat on the head. You will be my trump card.” His grin oozes glee. “And that’s just one of many, many opportunities. I could also sell you to someone else. As much as I despise you savage beasts, you lot go exceptionally well on the market.” He lifts a finger and scrapes his nail over the slope of Chuuya’s cheek. It doesn’t hurt as much it disgusts him. “I’m sure people would pay a lot of money for a night with you. I could make billions and never even lift a finger. And once you are done serving your purpose, you will accept my actual collar. You will make a fine addition to the gems in my vault.”

The after-effects of the shocks are so persistent that barely any other sensation, let alone thought, manages to pass through the fog of pain in his head, yet the revulsion that Ace’s words evoke is so intense that Chuuya manages to steal enough strength to form a sneer with his lips. “You’re so damn weak…” His chest heaves painfully. “… it’s sad… to listen to you.”

Ace’s jaw clamps shut. Though a moment later, his scowl bleeds into a dangerous, relaxed smile before he rises back to his feet. “So resilient. That’s all right. Breaking things is the hardest part of the process, but also the most satisfying one.”

“I won’t,” Chuuya grits out.

“Everyone breaks.”

And then he pushes the button again.

***

Chuuya’s bed was unmade, his sheets tossed aside and pieces of clothing lying on the floor as if he was in a hurry when he left his apartment. Add that with Kouyou’s reproduction of their first and last phone conversation and the task he was given, the conclusion Dazai draws is pretty simple: Chuuya never came home from the docks. The follow-up actions are even simpler.

If only he didn’t have to explain every single step of the way to that irritating brat of a girl.

“This is a waste of time,” Yuan says, tapping her shoe against the floors of his office. “If Chuuya’s co-workers did something to him, they wouldn’t just admit to that.” Her blazing glare lands on Dazai, who

occupies himself staring at his phone like it will make it ring any faster. “You’re the head of the mafia. You have the resources to raze down the city to look for him. Why aren’t you doing anything?”

“They’re Chuuya’s subordinates, and they would be brainless to do something to their superior, let alone an ability-user that outranks and outmatches them in every way possible,” Dazai informs her without lifting his gaze.

“Then why are we waiting for them instead of going out ourselves?!”

“Because they were the last people that saw him.” It’s so obvious that he starts wondering what the hell Yuan has been doing for the last few weeks. “Aren’t you working in Kouyou’s interrogation unit? I shouldn’t have to tell you any of this.”

“I – I’m just worried, okay! And you –” She gestures over Dazai. “You’re just sitting here and staring at your stupid phone! Do you even care?!”

Another stupid question.

“You know,” Yuan continues, her annoying voice drawing even *closer,* “I’m not dumb enough to fall for any of your acts -- and neither is Chuuya, by the way -- but I actually started to believe that there is one part, one tiny, little part of you, that actually cares about him. It didn’t make any sense to me because you don’t even know him, but the way you treated him in that restaurant or stood up for him when you made the sheep clean up their shit made me believe otherwise. Now I see I was wrong. It was an act. All of it. Lying is the only thing you’re capable of.”

It’s both fascinating and upsetting how much Dazai sees Chuuya in her. They are both too damn stubborn to care about rules or norms when it comes to speaking their mind, both so honest that it borders on being stupid, and both loud… and fighty…

Except that Chuuya is Chuuya, and Yuan is the empty, shriveled can of beer that Dazai would like to kick away with his foot so he can stop hearing her talk.

“After all the years you spent together, do you honestly still think so little of him?”

Her mouth opens. Then it snaps shut again. Her eyes blaze with hatred and anger and all these emotions that are so big, yet so dreadfully

stifling. “I think more of Chuuya than you ever will,” she spits out eventually.

Dazai sighs at this predictable reaction. See? Stifling. “Chuuya has an ability that makes him one of the most powerful people on this planet, and he doesn’t even need it 99% of the time. If you could stop underestimating him for a single second and believe in him instead, you could use that time you spend freaking out to *think* and find him.”

“I know that he’s strong, but that doesn’t mean that he’s invincible,” she snaps back. “Or that he can’t be *hurt*. Aren’t there, like, thousands of people out there just waiting to get their hands on someone from the mafia to torture information out of them?!”

While those kinds of people exist, the same people are usually pretty naïve. If they weren’t, they would know that no torture in the world is scarier than being a traitor to the mafia. And that doesn’t make them a threat. It just makes them stupid, especially to someone like Chuuya.

“Something else happened,” Dazai finds himself saying out loud.

Thankfully, he hears the doors of his office open then, followed by the sound of footsteps. As he takes his place behind his desk, he notices Yuan glancing around with wide, flustered eyes and taking pity. He beckons her to stand next to him when the guards bring in Chuuya’s subordinates.

Four of them.

Miura. Costa. Shiraki. And Handa.

Just like that, another piece of the puzzle falls into place. Still, he proceeds to question them about the mission with Chuuya and gets information that is neither surprising nor useful: Chuuya came alone on his motorcycle, the mission went smoothly without any hitches, and after the extraction and the clean-up squad arrived, the subordinates went home. The only piece of information that’s relevant is that Shiraki and Miura saw Chuuya talking to the fifth member of his team, Karma, for several minutes, though they have no idea what it was about.

Though Karma’s relevance became pretty much clear from the moment his guards failed to locate him in his dorm, nor anywhere else despite several calls, texts, and even e-mails.

After Dazai sends them away again, he receives a call from the people he sent to the docks to look for any clues left behind. They found Chuuya's motorcycle. The port mafia's surveillance cameras conveniently blacked out during the entire night. And apparently, someone reported their boat as stolen in the surrounding area.

He continues to ignore Yuan, drilling holes into the back of his skull as he makes two other calls before he finally locks his phone and gets up. "We're going."

"Did you – do we know where Chuuya is?"

"I will know where the person is who knows where he is in about five minutes." He halts in front of his wall and places his palm over it until an electric shelf slides out. Grabbing two guns from the inside, he turns and offers one to Yuan. When she goes to grab it, he holds it out of her way. "Do you know how to use one?"

"Yes, I'm not a fucking child."

"People don't automatically learn how to use guns when they become adults. Criminals do."

For the first time today, there is something other than glaringly obvious emotions in the look that she shoots him. There is depth. Something old, something bitter. "I learned how to do it when I was six years old. Do I qualify or not?"

A childhood sob story then. Nothing Dazai has seen before, but something that does qualify her to wield a weapon that can kill people, yes. He presses it into her waiting hand without another word or glance, then leads them into the elevator and pushes the button that will take them to the parking garage level.

Riding the elevator is much less fun without Chuuya, he notices as they skip thirty floors. So were all the other things in the last few days.

Empty.

Their ride is already waiting for them when the doors slide open, *Gangsters in Paradise* blaring from the inside.

Dazai's phone chimes with an incoming text when he slides into the passenger seat.

“We know the location yet, boss?” Albatross asks after he turns down the music to a reasonable level.

Dazai shows him the location on his screen that he received, courtesy of one of the mafia’s best hackers pinging every possible device Karma could be carrying with him: his phone, the laptop he received, any bank cards, *everything*. Both his phone and his card were used in the same area an hour ago: a motel that’s not too far away from the docks.

“Wait,” Yuan’s face perks up behind them, “Is that where he is? Or that other boy?”

Dazai sees Albatross’ eyes widen in surprise – how he has worked himself so high in the mafia while being so extraordinarily dense at times is fascinating but sadly not shocking. “Oh. Hi. Yuan, right?”

“Right.” Without asking for his name, she turns her attention to Dazai instead, who beckons Albatross to floor it.

“Do you even listen when I talk, or do you just look at me and nod?” Dazai asks Yuan in regard to her last question.

“You’re not exactly the easiest person to follow, you know.”

“Chuuya has no trouble following me,” he points out.

“Well, I’m not Chuuya.”

“And I am dismally aware of that.”

“Okay!” Albatross butts in with a high-pitched chuckle. “So Chuuya-kun’s MIA… what are we thinking, is he really missing, or are you two just worrying a wee bit too much over a few missed calls?”

“I’m not worrying too much,” suddenly Dazai *and* Yuan say at the same time. It causes a flash of irritation to blow a few of his brain cells. What the hell does she think she is doing stealing his line?

Albatross’ glee only expands. “Oi, boss, she is more like Chuuya than you think!”

“She’s not.”

“What does that mean?” Yuan demands.

“So, we were on a mission last week, the three of us, doing our thing,

ya know, and then I asked something, and they both answered with the same thing at the same time! Just like you two."

There is a pause before Yuan speaks. "So you know Chuuya, too?"

"Well, not as well as the boss here, obviously, but we talk. Sometimes. Okay, so I do most of the talking, but that's just Chuuya-kun, huh? A quiet little dude."

Quiet.

Of all the adjectives in the world, quiet is the least accurate one to describe him. Chuuya isn't quiet. He is loud. He is loud about his opinions. He is loud when he laughs. He is loud when he's excited about French wine that tastes good. He lives loudly and loves just the same.

"Or maybe he just doesn't like you," Yuan announces from the back.

"Huh? What'd I do?"

"I'm just saying. Chuuya's not quiet when he's with me."

"Ah, wait." Albatross looks so terribly confused Dazai is already feeling pity for him. Just not enough to offer him a hand out of the mess. "So you two are --?"

"Hah?"

"I mean – you said he was loud –"

"I meant that he's not really quiet."

"That still sounds kind of dirty…"

"No," Yuan says, "I think that's just you."

"In my defense, it's because –"

Dazai turns up the music to a volume that drowns out the details of his sex life, or lack thereof, that Albatross was about to over-share with her. And he doesn't do it, so he won't ruin his chances of getting his dick wet completely. He simply doesn't want to be part of this particular argument.

When they arrive at the address, Dazai makes himself sit back and let the five other cars surround the motel to cut off any possible escape

despite the unsteady beat of impatience inside his chest. He is already breaking a thousand of his own laws by being here. Picking up a grunt for interrogation isn't even the job for an executive, let alone the boss, but he is starting to theorize that the law of gravity isn't the only thing Chuuya can manipulate.

Once he receives the signal that the targets are secured, Dazai gets out of the car, Albatross and Yuan trailing close behind him. A few dozen mafiosi respectfully bow their head and lower their gazes when they part to make way for him. Two of his men open the door to a single room, the number 48 written in already fading black letters.

Inside are more black-clad mafiosi. Most of them are pointing their guns at the handful of teenagers that are crowded together on a small shabby bed, eyes huge in terror, hands trembling where they're lifted over their heads, like a stock of pigs that are about to get slaughtered. The only one who looks like he has any idea of what's going on is Karma, so Dazai's gaze zeroes in on him.

"Tell me what happened."

Karma's eyelids flutter once, twice, then he sucks in a deep breath and starts blabbering. "I-I wanted to save a friend of mine because she was sick and no one was helping her, but I didn't know – and then Chuuya-san asked me what's wrong, and I told him, and h-he said he would help, and so we saved the friend and the others b-because they would have been killed otherwise and then we brought Ruby to an h-hospital, and they said they would take care of her and then we came here and – it was all my fault! I take the responsibility, but I couldn't let them just die!"

The entire room is completely silent except for Karma's loud, excessive breathing. Every in- and exhale makes Dazai's patience twitch in irritation.

"Where is Chuuya?"

Karma swallows. The answer is right there in his eyes, but he doesn't speak.

Not taking his gaze off the boy, Dazai stretches out his hand to the mafioso standing closest to him. "Hand me your gun." A second later, he feels the familiar material of steel press against his fingers. Dazai makes sure it's loaded before he takes a step closer to the bed and points the barrel at the head of the youngest child in the room while his eye remains fixed on Karma. He hears hitches of breaths all around

the room. The young boy starts crying silently. “Perhaps I made it look like I’m here for a friendly chat. Sorry for the misunderstanding. Tell me where Chuuya is, or I will shoot your friends. One by one.”

“I don’t know where he is!” Karma exclaims, his gaze anxiously darting between Dazai and the gun in his hand. “He told us to go, that he would catch up b-but I don’t know whether he did, or something happened or if he went somewhere else! I don’t know, okay! Please don’t kill my friends for my mistakes! It was me!”

What a mess.

“Now, you’re going to explain everything once again without leaving out any details this time.” Dazai holds Karma’s gaze until he receives a shaky nod, then he lowers the gun so the boy can fill in the blanks that are still empty without stammering because of the immediate threat. It’s not logical, of course, since there are still twenty other submachine guns in the room, ready to go off at any moment, but the thing about fear is that it’s not always rational. “Slowly and thoroughly. Got it?”

“Y-yeah. So…”

And for the next fifteen minutes, Karma finally tells them what happened: Ace’s secret hideout in the form of a ship out in the Yokohama Bay, dreadful work conditions and even worse health security, the mission, Chuuya’s stupid, big heart and desire to help, the stolen boat, the collars, the other subordinates, the failed escape, and Chuuya’s gallant sacrifice that quite obviously led to his capture.

While Karma didn’t end up being a spy for Ace – something that Dazai had first assumed – or a dirty, little rat for someone else, but simply a foolish child who wanted to save his friends, there is one codex that he broke. One mistake that is grander than all his other mishaps. And it makes Dazai’s fingers itch with the urge to lift that gun again and splatter his brain matter all over the walls.

“Do you not have a single ounce of loyalty within you?” Dazai is curious to know once the story comes to an end.

Karma blinks. “Huh? You mean… for the master?”

“Ace hasn’t been your master for a while now. Something you have Chuuya to thank for. Chuuya who refused to let your friends rot on a ship though he knew it could backfire. Chuuya who stayed behind so *you* could escape. And yet you didn’t even bother to inquire

whether he ever made it out. You didn't even bother to tell anyone so they could help Chuuya if something had happened to him." The words taste like acid, leaving blisters on his tongue that hiss and pop like angry vultures. "So I want to know where your loyalty is, Karma, because otherwise I will have to assume that you wanted your superior to go down for your mistakes, and that's not going to end well for you."

"I… I was going to," Karma whispers eventually. "I was going to look for Chuuya-san, but we had to go the hospital and –" He stops and swallows loudly, casting his eyes to the ground. "I was scared to tell anyone about what happened."

"You were scared," Dazai echoes quietly.

So no loyalty *and* a coward?

He has no idea what Chuuya sees in him. Then again, Chuuya has always had a horrible taste in friends and relationships.

"Seize them and keep them in the basement for now," Dazai tells his men with a flick of his finger. He will decide what to do with them later. He has a feeling Chuuya might throw a fit if Dazai ends up executing the same children that he worked so hard to rescue.

And as for Ace having Chuuya…

There is only so much mercy one can grant their useless underlings.

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Chuuya can't tell how much time has passed since he saw Karma and the others land safely in the water. It could have been only one day. Or maybe three. No longer than that because this is the first time someone other than Ace enters his cell and actually brings him a jug of water to drink. His throat is scraped raw from the nerve damage that the shock-collar must have given him, so the thirst has just blended in with all the other forms of discomfort throbbing under his skin. Though the sight of water, water for *him,* reminds Chuuya of it with a violent urgency.

The person carrying it is a young woman with short, black hair. She lifts her hand, and Chuuya can almost taste it, but then she stops short, right in front of him. His heart falls.

For a moment, he thinks this is another one of Ace's methods to break

him. Electro-shocking can only be done so many times until it becomes life-threatening, and that would disrupt his plans, of course. Ace's next step was to press his fingers into the places that hurt the most, but it just made Chuuya blackout from the pain at some point. Maybe now he is trying to break him with water.

Chuuya has to admit that it's the most efficient method so far.

Pain is something you have to endure.

But thirst is a primal instinct. It's not something you tolerate but something you have to *satisfy*. A need so animalistic and devastating that Chuuya would be snarling right now if he had any voice left.

The woman lifts the jug again, though, and that's when he notices that her fingers are shaking. That's why it's taking her so long. She is scared. Like he is some kind of animal that will gnaw her hand off for daring to approach him.

What a joke.

After a few more tries, she gathers enough courage to finally bring the jug to his face. Chuuya opens his mouth and greedily accepts anything that he can get, even if half of the water ends up spilling down his neck and chest. The shocking cold grazing his sore upper body makes him hiss and nearly choke but never stop because of the massive hole in the bottom of his stomach that demands to be filled with fluids, with water, until he drowns on it.

It's over too soon, and the woman takes a few hasty steps back from him. "Did you really kill them?" she whispers. "The others?"

Chuuya can only stare flatly at her.

That's what Ace told her? And the rest of his crew? That Chuuya came here to kill his army of children?

He would have thought that Ace would try to use his subordinates to soften Chuuya up, get information out of him, a good cop, bad cop kind of tactic.

Instead, he made them scared of him.

So they will be too terrified to even think of helping him.

It's a grand strategy. One that involves Chuuya staying here for a long,

long time.

***

Ace returns when Chuuya falls into a fitful sleep that is too easy to disrupt with the piercing rattle of steel against steel. Squinting warily, he watches Ace drag a chair into his cell and sit down.

Chuuya stopped talking back a while ago. Partly because speaking hurt too badly; partly because it made Ace try harder. And no matter how gratifying those fleeting moments of aggravation on his face were, they weren't worth the pain that followed. That, unlike the satisfaction, is *not* fleeting.

Right now, he can't bite back the question, though. "You going to try…" He pushes past the razor-sharp throbbing in his throat. "… to annoy me into breaking?"

"I'm going to have an honest conversation with you," Ace replies with a self-explanatory nod. "While there is no point in trying to reason with animals, it is obvious to me that you are a pack member. You care deeply for your friends, don't you, Chuuya?"

Chuuya's eyelids flutter shut again. He would prefer another hit with the shock-collar over this.

"Why else would you join the organization that you hated so deeply just to save one single person from a jail sentence?"

Maybe Dazai is right. Maybe Chuuya should stop showing the world what he cares about, so the world can stop trying to take it away from him. Maybe he, too, should surround himself in mist and rumors and odd pieces of information that don't fit together to form an entire picture.

"If you think about it, you and I have the same enemy," Ace continues idly. "Dazai Osamu. He crushed your organization. He made you his subordinate. He took away your friends. Don't you want to see him pay for that?"

Someday.

Yeah, someday Chuuya would like to see Dazai pay for that, but his version of that future wildly differs from the one Ace has in mind.

He wants to see Dazai on his knees for him. Again. Because that one

time wasn't enough. He wants Dazai to thrash and struggle and fail to get out of Chuuya's grip. He wants Dazai to suffer just to see what it would look like on his face. He wants to see Dazai caught off guard.

But he doesn't want Dazai dead. Never dead. Because whatever it is that Dazai has done to him is too big and too damn consuming of a drug to live without after getting a taste. He wants Dazai to stay alive forever, pump him full of that thrilling sensation so Chuuya never has to feel empty and alone again.

"— I could ensure that you and your friends would be able to stay together for the rest of your lives. Here, under my rule, of course, but together. Doesn't that sound good?"

No. It sounds like hell actually. Chuuya would rather go through this alone for the rest of eternity instead of dragging his friends along.

"Or, if you're feeling merciful, I could guarantee their total and complete safety. Far from the port mafia… who will dispose of them as soon as they notice their ringleader isn't there anymore."

Chuuya feels the muscles in his hands quiver.

Will the port mafia really? Will *Dazai?*

He does not care the least bit about the sheep, that's for sure. God knows how many times he implied the only reason he tolerates them is because of Chuuya but… will Chuuya's absence be enough to execute a few dozen of his friends?

Though the actual question should be: what does Dazai make of all this?

The thought of him noticing that Chuuya is gone and accepting it without any fuss seems absurd. Chuuya might have thrown a temper tantrum the last time they talked, and he might have tried to choke Dazai, and then kiss him, but if there is anything he is 100% sure of it's that Dazai is not someone to let an argument stop him from doing anything, especially after all the time and effort he put into…

No.

Chuuya doesn't understand it, but for some reason, Dazai Osamu thinks that he matters.

What he does understand is that Dazai's intelligence and

resourcefulness has no bounds. Ace might think he is the master that controls the game, but in the end, he's just another player, and not a particularly big one either.

So Ace can say whatever he wants. Fact is that the sheep will be safe as long as Dazai thinks they still have a strategic value, which they do, because Chuuya's *not* going to spend the rest of his life here. Maybe it will take another few days. Maybe a week. Or even months. But someday Dazai will find this ship and make sure his efforts haven't been all in vain.

The realization makes Chuuya giggle quietly. He tries to stifle it. He really does. It hurts, and it only provokes Ace to become more creative, but the sound comes from so deep in his breastbone he can't hold it back. He just laughs and laughs and laughs until tears start pooling in his eyes, dripping down his cheeks in hot trails and making him flinch when they reach his wounds.

Still, he can't stop. It's just too funny. All of this is so very, very funny.

Oh, he must be losing his mind.

Then he catches sight of Ace's expression, and everything starts hurting even more.

His situation, his life – hell, his fucking upbringing sound downright absurd when he thinks about them. Chuuya could have become anyone in the entire whole wide world with his gift and he chose to be a homeless street rat that robs gas stations for a living and sleeps in abandoned railway stations. He has a chance to rise to the top of the most powerful organization in Yokohama, and he doesn't want to *because his friends might shun him.*

It's hysterical.

"You will come to regret this," he hears Ace say somewhere above him.

He is still laughing maniacally, still trying to catch his breath when the collar around his neck goes off again.

He stops laughing after that.

***

"I will kill him," Dazai murmurs. "Take him apart piece by piece.

From top to bottom. I will strip off the flesh of his feet, his legs, then his –"

"How about you calm down first?" Kouyou cuts in, taking a seat at the table.

Dazai lifts his gaze to give her a smile. It's an honest one. As real as life. "I am calm, Ane-san. Can't you see?"

"I see you plotting to take apart one of your executives when there's no need for it. You of all of people know how important it is to leave personal feelings out of business."

"Ace stole from me. I don't take very kindly to treason."

"Chuuya-kun stole from him first," Kouyou points out. Then she sighs – which is quite a rarity from a woman like her. Who is the one who needs to calm down? "I hate the man just as much as everyone else here does, boss, but you and I both know that there will be more bloodshed if you go on the offense now. Ask him nicely first. You're still his boss even if his loyalty is not to you."

Dazai contemplates her words as he lets his eye wander to the other executives gathered around his table. They were in the same position just a few days ago. However, that was a perfunctory meeting. This one was called into action because Dazai wants one of his five executives dead, now, and to maintain order and trust, he needs to consult with his people first. Whether he listens to them is another matter entirely.

Piano Man agrees with a delicate nod. "Coax him into your arms. Then hit him hard."

"I've been wanting to blow him up since day one," Albatross says with a shrug. Technically, he's not an executive but he is Dazai's left-hand man, so he has a seat at the table, too. "But I guess a more conservative approach would be easier. We want Chuuya-kun back in one piece, after all."

Then the Colonel clears his throat. "I still don't see the issue here, boss. That brat let Ace's subordinates loose without permission. *He* committed treason *first*, so why aren't you plotting to kill him?"

The silence that falls over the room crackles.

Dazai's eye fixates on the man. He smiles faintly.

“Dude, maybe you forgot but that’s not just any brat we’re talking here about,” Albatross finally mutters.

“Oh, sorry, I forgot that he’s also the boss’ plaything. Or ‘husband’. Whatever. Nakahara is from an enemy organization, and it was clear from the very start that he would end up betraying us. Welp, here it is.”

Dazai’s smile darkens. “Colonel-san, are you saying you do not find it odd at all that Ace has a lair that he kept a secret from the mafia?” Above them the clock ticks relentlessly. Time never stops moving. “You aren’t wondering what Ace could be keeping hidden there? Any reason for that?”

The accusation is baseless, of course, but the echo of it still booms through the room like the earth’s personal heartbeat. Part of Dazai’s charm is his thirst for knowledge of everything and everyone. While he wouldn’t call himself dim-witted, the rumors tend to exaggerate the extent of that little quirk, and that… that is where real power comes from. Because it doesn’t matter what he knows or what he doesn’t know. What matters is that others think he does.

The Colonel might be 100% sure that he is no traitor. His fellow executives, on the other hand? It just went down from a steady 80% to 60%, and in a shark tank like the port mafia, a 60% credibility is the equivalence of dripping *blood.*

“I’m not –” The Colonel frowns furiously. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Poor simple-minded creature. He doesn’t even know how guilty that makes him sound. “All I meant to say was that mistakes were made from both sides. The Nakahara boy shouldn’t have the guts to go against an executive like that. Hiding things or not, Ace still outranks him. That is the hierarchy.”

“Ace disrespects the hierarchy all the time,” Kouyou points out.

“In fact, his first act of respecting the chain would have been to alert Kouyou-san or the boss of the transgression,” Piano Mann adds, offering a half-shrug with his arm thrown over the back of the chair. “He could have asked for punishment on his behalf. It was his right. But he failed to inform anyone and took matters into his own hands instead. *That’s* disrespecting the hierarchy at its finest.”

“The man *bought* himself the executive title.” Albatross squints into the round. “Are we really surprised?”

Defeated, the colonel throws up his hands. “Fine, go ahead.” His eyes land on Dazai and the lines of frustration mellow out into something more compliant, something stiff and proper. “You have led us this far, boss. I am going to trust that you know what you are doing.”

“Leave,” Dazai tells them without much ado. They have robbed him of enough time already.

Unlike this endless back-and-forth discussion, their departure is quick and quiet. Once Dazai is alone, he fishes out his phone and goes through the list of numbers Gin forwarded to him an hour ago before pressing the screen to his ear.

It rings three times.

“Yes?”

“Ace, hello. It’s me. Your boss. Remember?”

There is an exhale on the other end. “How could I ever forget, boss? Is there something you need me for?”

“Why, yes, there is indeed. I believe I have something of yours. Fourteen somethings, actually. Does it ring any bell?”

“Maybe.”

“And you have something of mine.”

“Oh?”

“You will return it to me by… let’s say, sunrise? Wonderful. I’m so glad we had this conversation. Oh, and Ace?” His tone drops a few octaves. “I do not tolerate tardiness. There will be consequences if you try to test my patience today.”

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter we have:
- a reunion
- a realization
- and a deal

Btw, I created a collaborative playlist for this fic which means that everyone can add songs that they think match the vibes or that they listen to when reading, so feel free to join in :)

Chapter 14: A Setting Sun

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

One of the first few lessons that Dazai ever learned in his childhood was that feelings were only extensions of the human body. Like prosthetics, they carried you through life, supported you, and brought you closer to the objects you desired. They also made you weak.

The man who taught him that lesson believed that in order to survive you had to cut off every false ornament of humanity and see people for what they are: meat. Nothing more, and nothing less than that.

The man that came after that coaxed Dazai out of the slaughterhouse and showed him that there was more to the world than pragmatism. Power is poison. Power is strategic. Power is the art of timing, seduction, a dainty smile. It lies in more than just the hand that butchers the strongest.

And so over time, he picked up bits and pieces from both extremes to build himself anew.

Dazai's anger, it's neither friend nor foe. It's his weapon. He studies it, sees what it's made of, what it can do, and once he identifies its substance, he begins forming it like clay. He shapes his fury into bullet-powder, into claws, into the hiss of a viper… or into the threads of a harmless smile that greets Ace when he marches into his office with his hand on the back of Chuuya's neck.

Chuuya, who is gagged.

Chuuya, whose unkempt, beaten down appearance makes it look like he spent weeks on that ship rather than one and a half days.

Chuuya, whose bloodshot eyes are buried behind a distant glaze when they lift to meet Dazai's.

Ace shoves him to his knees and is daft enough to let out an exaggerated sigh. "Boss, I have to admit that I'm surprised. One insolent grunt for fourteen people? He must be pretty important for you to make such miscalculations."

"See, that's where you're wrong," Dazai chortles and tilts his head to

have a better view of watching understanding dawn on Ace's face. "Not even a thousand of your piss-poor attempts of soldiers would be enough to replace him."

The executive, if even only for another minute or so, tentatively glances around himself, taking stock of the office, the array of mafia guards waiting for orders, but the lack of the hostages that he was promised in exchange for Chuuya.

Drop, drop, drop.

And the dam breaks in.

"He disrupted my work, damaged my property, and stole from me," it bursts out of Ace, his voice ringing with the pitch of a sullen child throwing a temper tantrum for getting scolded because he broke someone else's toys. *But – but – he!!!*

It's pathetic.

Giving his subordinates a nod, Dazai pushes away from his desk to cross the distance and reach out to help Chuuya off his knees, steadying him by the waist. He wobbles to his feet with a small noise in the back of his throat. Their eyes meet again, Dazai frees him from the gag and scowls at the smudges of blood smeared over his lips, rubbing them away with his thumb before he can think better of it.

"What do you think you're doing?!" Ace sputters in the background. "The brat *attacked* me! He – hey, get your hands off me! Hey! Boss! You --! I disciplined a traitor as I saw fit! You can't punish me for that! I'm an executive!"

Dazai tugs Chuuya in the other direction. He only stops to send Ace a blistering smile over his shoulders. "I do punish incompetent underlings. Very severely."

His men don't need another order to know what to do. Ace's shrill protests trail off into the distance until they fade altogether.

Dazai doesn't act on his anger. But after he has let it fester for long enough, he releases it and watches it devour people alive.

Shuffling behind Chuuya, he takes stock off the handcuffs binding his wrists together – the ability-nullifying sort. When he gave Ace permission to steal a pair is a mystery to him. There is only a handful of them in the mafia, and they are supposed to only get used with

explicit permission.

Breaking a lock without a key has never been a problem though, so thanks to one of the permanently residing pins in his pocket, Chuuya is soon freeing his hands with a soft hiss.

After setting the cuffs aside, Dazai turns to him to examine the damage. His right hand reaches out, fingertips hovering over Chuuya's jaw, but he understands, tipping his chin up so Dazai can scan the injuries around his neck. Anger, his old companion, takes a good look too, memorizes every burned and bruised patch of skin, and absorbs it like fire swallows iron before it shapes it into swords.

"Shock collar?"

Chuuya nods.

"I'll take you to the infirmary. See if there is anything internal."

"It's not that bad," says the man whose voice sounds like his vocal cords are pieces of shrapnel. "I regenerate pretty fast."

"Uh-uh," Dazai nods wryly, "I'd rather not take the chances, thank you very much."

Chuuya gazes back for a moment before casting his eyes somewhere Dazai can't see. The blinding sunset behind him casts shadows on his face. "Aren't you going to say anything?"

"Say what?"

"I don't know. You just arrested one of your executives because of something I did."

"Ace has had it coming for a long time."

"That's it?"

"I could say that the next time you decide to go rogue for a bunch of helpless children, you could at least give me a warning beforehand. Or *anyone.* Spare yourself a lot of pain, you know." Dazai shrugs. "But somehow I believe that you've already internalized that lesson."

Chuuya's chastened look has the air of a guilty puppy who got caught peeing on the carpet. "Shut up."

"You asked."

“So the kids are safe? Karma?”

Dazai decides that they should get going then, placing a hand on Chuuya’s back as he steers them towards the elevator. “Safe and sound. Are you okay to walk?”

“’m fine,” Chuuya grumbles.

“I don’t think you even know what that word means.” Take aside the fact that his footsteps are dragging from the pain he’s in, he was still held captive. Still tortured. And even though Dazai has never held no high regards for Ace’s capabilities, it’s hard to deny that he has a sadistic streak. One that he let out on Chuuya.

That kind of experience is traumatic, for both body and mind.

Chuuya refuses to let it show though, staring ahead. But piece by piece, his shoulders start slumping, bending under the weight of the last two days. He still doesn’t speak, even when he twists his fingers in the sleeve of Dazai’s shirt. Chuuya’s hand shakes, yet his grip is so tight that it must be compensation for the glare that he is probably too battered to muster right now. Dazai lets him without offering any more words, only his weight. Something to lean on.

“I’m just tired,” Chuuya eventually whispers.

Quietly, Dazai touches his back. He sags a bit further.

The infirmary is all the way down on the first floor. When the doors slide open, Dazai waits until a squeeze signals that it’s okay. It’s a short walk down the hallway and around the corner. The mafia’s medical team has already been on standby for an hour now, so they are prompt to receive Chuuya and steal him away.

Doc, one of port mafia’s few licensed underground doctors, inspect the burns on his neck, all while providing an animated commentary. Chuuya grunts out one-word-replies when he has to, his eyes involuntarily drifting shut now and then before he jerks himself upright every time.

After they wheel him away for a few scans to rule out any internal damage, Dazai takes a seat on an empty bed on the other side of the room. He might as well get some work done while he is waiting.

Half an hour later, Chuuya returns in a surgical gown, but also with a faint smile on his face that wasn’t there before, already pepping up.

“I told you,” he says with his nose high in the air when Dazai comes to a halt at the foot of his bed. “The devil works hard, but my ability works harder.”

“No need to be so smug about,” Dazai quips back before glancing at Doc. “Everything’s okay?”

“Would I be standing here otherwise? Fufufu, his heart looks good. There were traces of opioids in his blood, but the dose was non-dangerous.”

Dazai’s gaze slides to Chuuya. “He drugged you?”

“Apparently,” he replies with a light-hearted shrug.

“We gave him something for the pain,” Doc adds, bringing more light to the change in Chuuya’s mood, yet also raising flickering question marks.

“Is that safe when he already had something in his system?”

Doc waves him away. “Yes, yes, don’t you worry, boss. I’m going to put some ointment on his skin to make it heal faster, and then he’ll be done.”

Chuuya preens as if a quick recovery is some kind of personal accomplishment. To a competitive person like him, a racehorse that needs to be chasing down a finish line to feel something at all times, it probably is.

Dazai shoots him an unimpressed stare in return, then says, “Okay. Thank you, Doc.”

At the same time a loud, “Chuuya!” rings through the infirmary.

A moment later, Yuan is by his side, knuckles turning white around the bed frame as she surveys him, expression warring between blistering anger and dizzying relief.

The taste of these jarring sensations still lingers in Dazai’s mouth too.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“You don’t *sound* fine.” She smacks Chuuya’s arm. “You asshole! Do you even realize how worried I was?”

That makes him grimace. “I’m sorry?”

“Don’t apologize! Just stop being such a self-sacrificing idiot. And next time you do something this stupid, take me with you.”

Chuckling nervously, Chuuya scratches the back of his neck.

Dazai gives his feet a tap, then retreats back into his corner to let them catch up while Doc is working his magic.

Yuan.

Born Yuan Xingzhuang as the daughter of a Chinese immigrant who came to Japan after the end of the war. Her mother eventually married a businessman from Yokohama who became Yuan’s stepfather.

There are five reports of Yuan visiting the hospital throughout the first five years of her childhood here. A few bone fractures, sprained wrists, a brain concussion, and a split cheek, all results of unfortunate accidents at home and on the playground according to her mother. Her pre-school reports state that she was quiet and inattentive during lessons, little to no friends, the only subject she took an interest in maths.

Her parents filed a missing report when she was seven. A few suspected sightings were reported over the years, but her family never did anything to find her after the one-month mark. She never came home.

Three years later, the law enforcement started making a file on her. Robberies. Stealing. Assault. Association with the local youth-gang the Sheep, and the ability user Nakahara Chuuya. At the age of fourteen, she was part of an investigation involving three dead civilians. At twenty, she was linked to the criminal syndicate port mafia.

There isn’t any universe in which Dazai will look at her and not be overcome with the entire spectrum of negative emotions. Her tale is unfortunate, but it isn’t special, a dime a dozen in Suribachi city, and in the end, the sheep, another few dozen sob stories, always end up *robbers*.

But right now, watching Chuuya talk to her, there’s a glimmer in his eyes that wasn’t there before, even not after getting pumped full of pain meds. Something luminous and glowing, melting the ice of his injuries and his pain. Something that doesn’t get diminished, doesn’t

get crammed into a tiny box with his name on it. A flame that burns as dazzling as the sun with Yuan in the room.

Something good.

“I’ve heard the good news!” Dazai tears his gaze away to see Albatross taking a seat next to him. “So everything’s okay?”

“As okay as the situation allows it.”

“Ace?”

“Locked up.” Probably screaming himself hoarse.

Albatross rubs his hands together and chortles out a pitiless chuckle. “Man, I don’t want to be in his skin for the next few days.”

Dazai’s drags his gaze to him. “You do realize she’s not going to start liking you just because you showed up here.”

“Chuuya-kun’s my friend too. I was worried!”

“Uh-uh.”

“But you really think she doesn’t like me? That what your superhuman senses are telling you?”

The door to the infirmary opens again. This time, it’s Kouyou, hard eyes softening when she sees Chuuya in one piece.

“Everything went well, I see,” she murmurs, joining their corner.

“I fail to remember when I invited all of you down here,” Dazai says.

Kouyou folds her arms together. “After all the fuss you made, I had to confirm that Chuuya-kun was all right for myself.”

“I saw an opportunity to get rid of Ace and took it. What you call a fuss, I call smart thinking.”

Albatross flippantly slaps his thigh, making a face. “Dude… you kind of did make a fuss.”

“You’re next in line after Ace,” Dazai tells him.

In every other situation his words would carry enough weight to crush mountains. Right now, Albatross grins, unruffled. He does take away

his hand though. “I’m too good of a driver to be replaced by someone else.”

Across the room, both Chuuya and Yuan glance over, something that makes Albatross jump to all sort of conclusions. “See, she’s totally talking about me.”

Humming, Dazai smiles mockingly. “Because you’re the most important thing she has to talk about after Chuuya got tortured for two days.”

“Joking!” Albatross flaps his never-resting limbs through the air. “I’m joking, of course! They’re obviously talking about you.”

One day, Dazai is going to take a rock and smash it over this man’s head. Repeatedly.

The thing that stops him is Piano Mann – who, too, ignores Dazai’s disapproving stare in favor of smiling a pleased smile. “Chuuya-kun’s back and Ace is in confinement, huh?”

Albatross and Kouyou nod.

Dazai rubs a hand over his face.

Chuuya here, apparently, has *fans.*

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“Why are these people staring at us?” Yuan whisper-mutters as she pointedly does not turn her head to the other side of the room.

That’s a question that Chuuya would like the answer to himself. It was Dazai who brought him here, obviously. Albatross… well, Albatross hangs around Dazai a lot, so that makes sense. He was surprised to see Kouyou, but she’s his commander and one of the last people to have seen him before he ‘went missing’. That other man though? That even Chuuya can’t explain.

“No idea,” he says, pinching the bridge of his nose. The pain killers not only come with a pleasant buzz but a leeching exhaustion that clings to his eyelids and limbs. Though the things Yuan has been telling him are making him fight to keep his eyes open for as long as possible. “So you actually spent the day with Dazai? You and him? Together?”

“Well, it’s not like he let me do anything to help,” she mutters and rolls her eyes, “but yeah.”

It’s a surprisingly civil development for such a hostile relationship.

“Wow.”

Less than two months ago it was Chuuya in her place, grumbling over every single word that came out of Dazai but still staying and listening for the sake of keeping his friends safe. It’s not like the griping has stopped; it’s that on most days keeping Dazai at a safe antagonistic distance is the only thing preventing Chuuya from checking out what his tongue tastes like. Or, you know, his dick.

Judging by Yuan’s pursed lips, she did not fall down the same rabbit hole.

“He almost shot a twelve-year old boy in the head for you.”

Chuuya blinks. “Sorry?”

Yuan scratches her cheek, not looking any less puzzled than him.

“I thought he didn’t care. He was so nonchalant about the whole thing when we found out you were gone. So patient, y’know?” Her brows furrow. “So I thought he didn’t care and that pissed me off. But then we found that boy, Karma, and he was scared as hell, stumbling over his own words, and when Dazai asked him where you were, Karma didn’t answer at first. So Dazai pointed the gun at some kid and told him he’d shoot everyone if he didn’t start talking immediately.”

Chuuya searches for words that won’t make him sound oddly touched by something so heartless. He fails. “Dazai was just turning up the heat on him,” he ends up rationalizing. “A tactic. It’s smart.”

“I guess,” Yuan says with an aloof hum before she reaches out to grab his hand. “Are you sure you’re going to be all right?”

He squeezes her fingers in reply. “The pain is already starting to wear off. I’m fine.”

“You’re insane is what you are.”

“As if you wouldn’t have done the same thing.”

“I would have *after* calling my friends for back-up.”

“Well, there was no time,” Chuuya grumbles. “That girl was dying.”

Yuan clicks her tongue. “And you almost paid the price for it.”

“But I didn’t, so why are we still talking about this?” On the other end of the infirmary, Dazai, who is no longer surrounded by his executives, rises to his feet to come over. Chuuya swallows the treacherous flutter in his chest and channels that energy into keeping his expression neutral.

“Doc said you’re ready to go,” Dazai informs them when he pauses at the foot of the bed.

Chuuya nods. Yuan takes the cue to leave, but to his surprise, she looks directly at Dazai before that. It’s not a glare. Not anything friendly either. “Thank you,” she says. “For bringing him back.”

Dazai considers that for a long moment before replying, “thank you for helping.”

Yuan’s automatic reaction is a scowl, prepared to hear something mocking in return. When she realizes that it’s his genuine response to a genuine *thank you*, she goes slack jawed for a few glorious seconds before visibly schooling her surprise. She leans down to kiss Chuuya’s cheek, orders him to get some rest, then leaves in long, not-at-all-confused strides.

Chuuya can’t help but clutch his chest as he turns to Dazai. “If I had known that all it’d take is for me to get tortured to make you get along with my friends, I would have done it much sooner.”

“Friend,” Dazai corrects snobbishly and pokes his feet. “And it was a simple *thank you.* Nothing more and nothing less than that.”

“Strange, ‘cause she told me you didn’t give her much of an opportunity to help out.”

“I didn’t say I was thanking her for today, did I?” Before Chuuya can think too much about his words, Dazai jerks his chin towards him. “Come on, your one decent friend was right. You should get some rest.”

A nurse hurries over to give Chuuya a Yukata to change into, seeing as the clothes he was wearing before are now all stuffed into a plastic bag that Dazai refuses to give him because they’re too ‘dirty.’ He actually tosses them into the trash right outside the infirmary.

Back in the elevator, Dazai's attention on Chuuya as he leans against the wall for support cages him in and steals all his oxygen.

"It would be so much easier if you just let me carry you."

Chuuya grunts under his breath. "I don't need that."

"But you need a wall to lean on?"

Blowing air out of his cheeks, he pushes away from said wall, and lifts his hands to illustrate his point. "I don't need anything. See?" Except, of course, at this very moment, the ground sinks under his feet. Vision flickering, ears ringing, Chuuya stumbles… right back into Dazai who steadies him with two hands on each side.

"I see," he hears Dazai murmurs, his voice dangerously close to his ear and his chest dangerously warm against his back. "You have totally made your point."

Chuuya's throat is too dry to force words out of it.

All he can do is stand there with *two* heartbeats reverberating through him, and drink in the sinful taste of this burning heat even though Dazai is barely even touching him. There's only enough body contact to keep Chuuya from swaying again, enough to arouse goosebumps beneath the shadow of long fingers, but Dazai has this habit of making himself so… so *light.* Always the phantom touch of hands over skin, the sound of his smile in his ear, or the fragrant ghost of his smell behind Chuuya. Never him.

As if they live in two different realities, separated by a veil that's transparent enough to let them see each other but thick enough to never allow Dazai cross it.

At this point, Chuuya would probably burst into flames if he ever felt him skin on skin.

But god, he wants to.

He wants it so badly it makes him lean back ever so softly. Until it's not only his spine that's pressed against Dazai but his lower body too.

That alone is enough to make him clamp his mouth shut to stop any sounds from escaping as his entire vertebral column starts tingling.

"You should sleep in my bed tonight," Dazai suddenly says.

Chuuya's eyes fly open. The timing of this proposal is as odd as all the other secrets Dazai stole from him without ever even asking the questions, even though mind-reading is not the ability that he hasn't bother to both hide and to mention from Chuuya.

His throat frantically swallows to get something out. "Why…?"

This isn't telepathy. This is a dance. An invitation. A –

"Because I have a cat that purrs loudly when someone she tolerates pets her, and because the vibrations that cats produce supposedly alleviate pain."

"Oh."

This is *bullying*.

Dazai doesn't press further than that because he doesn't need to. As if Chuuya could keep it at a simple *oh*.

"I guess," he says eventually. "I do miss Jiji."

"Mm, she misses you too."

He should be ashamed for the perverse flutter of hope that coaxes him into saying *yes,* not the cat as opposed to his selfish lie, but he was this close to becoming the newest jewel in Ace's collection of gems. He deserves to feel something good. Is that so wrong to want?

The rest of the thirty-floors ride is quiet, a drowsy, honey-sweet kind of silence, over way too soon. The doors slide open way too soon, forcing Chuuya to rob himself of that warmth again and step away way too soon.

But instead of the cold, it's Dazai at his back again. Not as maddeningly close as in the elevator, but enough for now.

"Do you want to take a bath?" he asks in the bedroom.

Chuuya wrinkles his nose because he needs one, no question there, but he's barely able to keep his eyes open. "Yeah, but I might drown."

"Do you need swimming lessons?"

"*No.* I'm just beat."

"Take a shower," Dazai suggests. "I'll organize some food in the

meantime. Then you can sleep."

Closing the door of the bathroom behind him, stripping, and stepping into the shower is a strange experience, like he's breaching all kinds of borders even if there is no touching involved, not even someone but himself to touch. Only the dirt and sweat of the last few days running down his body in rivers and flowing down the drain.

In a way, Ace was something that needed to happen because Chuuya forgot.

He forgot that the port mafia is serious business, that it's an organization driven by cruelty and greed, that it's *real.* The sheep didn't attack them time and time again out of boredom. There was a reason. Still is. And only something of this caliber would be shocking enough to open his eyes again.

And yet here he is. Not with the sheep. Not even with Yuan. But with Dazai, the man in the heart of the devil's nest.

Chuuya is faster with his hair, grabbing the first products that he can find and ignoring the excited stumbling of his heart when the entire shower stall starts smelling like a certain note in Dazai's scent. There is a pile of fresh, folded towels that he can use once he's done. He scrubs himself dry, leaves the towel around his shoulders, then slips back into the yukata and steps out of the bathroom, heat and steam following him.

In the bedroom he finds a tray with food, a glass bottle of water on it and more pain killers. A dark heap of fur in is curled up on the bed, ears twitching when he rubs her tiny head in passing. Despite the hole in his stomach, his appetite is meagre, though for the sake of his body, he decides to at least grab a bite.

His fingers hover over the tray as he glances from the bed to the door that leads outside. He could take a few bites and go to sleep straight after. It's obvious that Dazai gave him the choice to be alone – which makes the invitation to sleep here even meaner. In the end, he lets the food float next to him as he walks past the kitchen to get back to the office.

Dazai is making his way through a stack of papers when Chuuya places his tray on the same desk, a tad too confident, only to have nowhere to sit down. There is no second chair here. Never has been.

"Here," getting up, Dazai pats his own, "take this."

Chuuya rolls his eyes. “I can get myself a –”

“Sit, Chuuya. It’s just a chair,” Dazai says, grabbing him by the shoulders and steering him around the desk until he has no other choice but to take a seat.

“It’s your chair,” he grumbles under his breath even as his butt tests out the padding. The chair of the *boss.* It’s only a temporary position, but it’s still symbolic, wrong, and forbidden.

Dazai ignores him in favor of rearranging files and folders on his desk, shoving some of them away while keeping others in a neat stack. Chuuya swallows down a few pieces of chicken before he asks, “What’s going to happen to Ace?”

“He will sing like a canary for the next few days,” Dazai answers matter-of-factly like he isn’t talking about torture. “And once there is nothing more to chirp about… well, then he has no use for us anymore.” His hands stop moving things around for a heartbeat to meet Chuuya’s eyes. “You can be the last person he will ever lay eyes on. If you want.”

You can get payback for what he did to you, is what he is saying. An offer to get an eye for an eye. A day of merciless pain by Ace’s hand for a merciless death by Chuuya’s.

He can’t deny that a part of him is itching to tear out his soul – no, his *resilience*. Do the very thing to Ace that Ace planned to do to him. Treat him like an animal that needs to be tamed. That needs to be broken.

That part though, is a god that never rests and always wants. Whose blood it gets doesn’t matter.

“I’m not big on vengeance,” he eventually decides. The world will be a better place without the man, that’s for sure, but it’s not Chuuya who spent his entire life chained to him. And whatever fleeting satisfaction he might feel by hurting him back will be quickly overshadowed by the hungry roar of a starving beast. Not worth it.

“What about his subordinates? What’s going to happen to them?” he asks when Dazai accepts his decision without further comments.

Impossibly, this, of all things, makes Dazai’s perfectly put together expression flicker like an indecisive light bulb. There, and gone, but Chuuya has become a master in observance. (That is, if his object of

study is Dazai Osamu.) “I have no use for them either but I’m assuming Chuuya doesn’t want his heroic efforts to go to waste.”

Chewing forcefully, Chuuya points his chopsticks at him in warning. “If you’re saying that I’m not going to let you go around and kill innocent children, then yeah, you’re fucking right.”

“Not all of them are children. And they’re a liability. After how thoroughly Ace broke them, they will be little to no use as mafia grunts, and putting aside the fact, that most of them are street rats with no knowledge of how life outside their collars works, they know only enough to be attractive to our enemies.” Dazai’s shoulder lifts in a half-shrug. “Useless.”

“Karma manages just fine.”

Dazai’s nostrils flare softly. “I beg to differ.”

“He’s a good kid!” Chuuya insists. *He* would know since he is the one who has actually spent time with him.

“Maybe, but he is also green behind his ears, scared, and loyal to his friends instead of the port mafia. You can eventually make someone out of him, I don’t doubt that, but doing that with the rest would be an epic waste of your time and talent.”

“If loyalty is what you’re so worried about, may I remind you that the port mafia also just freed them?” Seeing the steadfast resolution not to budge on Dazai’s face, Chuuya decides to give him some motivation. “Give them to me, and I will make another deal with you.”

Everything about Dazai’s reaction, from the way his smile sharpens to the way he stops shuffling around files to straighten his spine, promises that Chuuya is willingly walking into a tiger’s cage. “These are 14 people you are asking me for, Chuuya. Are you sure you are up to pay that kind of price?”

And like he is possessed by the ghost of a suicidal maniac, his stomach flutters with anticipation. Maybe he wants to be bitten. Just this once. “I thought they were useless,” Chuuya reminds him innocently. “Or did something change your mind?”

“Useless to *me*.”

As always, his *gotcha* moment never lasts long enough to savor fully. At least, there is enough anticipatory tension in the room to keep the

stubborn flame in Chuuya's breastbone ablaze, and the air in his lungs hot. "Well?"

"Fine." Dazai's arms swing back to come to rest behind him. "I will give you your army of broken misfits." Chuuya strains to listen as his heartbeat roars like a siren in his ears. "And you give me two minutes."

"Two minutes?"

"Two minutes."

"I'm not following," he admits.

"I know," Dazai says, his voice drips amusement that makes Chuuya both sweat and curl his fingers with impatience. Two minutes of *what?* "Come here, and you will."

Only someone with rocks in his head would agree to a deal that he didn't even get the conditions to, and yet Chuuya barely even hesitates before placing the chopsticks aside and getting up from the chair to walk around the desk. The only armor he wears is an exaggerated scowl, but otherwise he is defenseless. Practically naked.

When he comes to a halt in front of the tiger, Dazai nods, pleased. "Two minutes in which you don't say or do anything." His eye seeks out Chuuya's gaze. "Do you understand?"

Maybe.

There are only so many things he can do that he needs Chuuya pliant and quiet for – even though he does wonder what exactly counts as *doing something* because if this is going where he thinks it's going, where his silly little heart *hopes* it's going, then Chuuya is sure as hell not going to stand here like a dead fish.

Pulling his shoulders back to hide the flutter of his stomach, Chuuya shrugs. "Okay. I understand." Then he places his hands on his hips. He is ready. So ready.

"Okay."

He is ready for all of it. For Dazai to cross the distance -- although it is not big, they do stand too far apart to do anything other than shake hands. For Dazai to finally touch him instead of just hovering. For the tension to finally snap. For the heat, the thousand mini heart attacks,

the taste of lips and tongue and need.

“You told me I can’t walk into your life as the villain and not play the part, so I’m going to make a choice,” Dazai says. “And then I’m going to give you one.”

He is *not* ready for Dazai to drop to one knee. Chuuya’s mouth opens to sputter, the conditions of their deal lost in the wind already, but the pointed stare that he receives makes him begrudgingly press his lips together to stop himself from speaking, his throat cotton-fucking dry, fingers digging into the flesh of his hips.

“I promise to you, Chuuya, I am not going to be your villain.” Dazai’s open expression is unwavering as he gazes up at him. Unshakable. Unyielding. “I will lay down my life and those of my subordinates to protect both you and your people. I will kill for you and your people. And I will make you and your people *my* people.” He bows his head, eye falling to the ground. “You will have both my fealty and my loyalty for as long as I live.”

Word for word, bit by bit, and piece by piece Chuuya’s arms crumble until all he can do is curl his hands as tightly as possible and hope they will be enough to keep him standing when the ground gives way.

“That’s my choice,” Dazai tells him, raising his head again. “Now you have to make yours. You can choose to stay here. With me. Or you can leave. All of you. You will never speak of what you saw, heard and did here, but you will be able to go. You will be free.”

And this is it.

The two minutes he wanted, when in reality it was an answer that he was asking for.

An answer that he *knows* Chuuya doesn’t want to make.

His jaw stings from how hard he’s been clenching it when he exhales sharply. “Can I go now?”

Dazai’s lashes flutter as he looks at him, but imminently he has to nod, same as the sun that has to set every day, same as a river that has to break off from the other when its path diverges, and same as two people who can’t stay on the same side when their people are on different ones.

People like them.

Because, in the end, everything passes.

That is the only thing that is certain in this world

Everything passes.

Chapter End Notes

I bet you thought this was heading somewhere else, right? >:)

Next up we have:
- a promotion
- a trial run
- a ghost of the past

Chapter 15: Impenetrable Thickets

Chapter Notes

> Happy 100k to this fic < 3 I'm finally done with my exams, so I hope I'll be able to set up a more regular updating schedule! I'm not going to make any promises because I'm still relatively busy, but I'll try my best, I really will. As always thank you so much for all the love < 3 I'm endlessly grateful and just SO happy that you guys like the story as much as I do! It makes writing it even more fun than it already is :') Anyways, I hope all of you are doing good, and wish you a happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Once his injuries heal – which happens within the span of a few days thanks to his hard-working ability – Chuuya gets assigned with the task of dealing with what's left of Ace's ship. Which is a lot.

Obviously, there are his subordinates. Dazai wasn't trying to be mean when he said that it would be difficult to integrate them into mafia society after what they've been through because it is. Young people are usually more resilient, but older people who have spent way too many years of their lives trafficked, chained, and silenced? Hard. Still worth trying though.

With the help of Karma and the other kids, he frees the rest of the crew and accommodates them in one of the mafia-affiliated housing districts for now. Then there is the ship itself and all the horrible secrets it hides. A vault full of gems doesn't sound that bad until you realize that these gems once used to be living, breathing people. Still, aside from that they also find quite a few stolen items from the port mafia: weapons, handcuffs, technology, black market valuables and even more gems – actual ones.

The most important discovery, though, is the list that Ace has compiled. At first, Chuuya doesn't realize what he is looking at when he gets his hands on it. His reading skills have been steadily improving – it still takes him a considerably longer time to decipher the meaning of characters and put them into a coherent sentence, but written texts no longer look like a damn puzzle to him. Then he realizes that it's a list of names that he recognizes, some of them anyway, and detailed descriptions of their abilities.

All this time, Ace has been secretly keeping track of the mafia's members and the gifts they harbor. If someone from the outside, say the government or an enemy organization, had gotten their hands on it, the consequences would have been catastrophic. It's what the sheep were looking for. Something powerful enough to deliver a fatal blow to Dazai and his people.

Except now they don't even need it anymore.

Chuuya never asks about Ace, but one time, he sees a speck of blood on the bandages around Dazai's wrists.

A day later, the former executive is declared dead.

And just like that, Chuuya's rogue mission suddenly turns into a huge victory for the port mafia: stolen items recovered, a gigantic ship and its treasures secured, and a traitorous member unmasked. At least, that's how Dazai manages to spin the story to make Chuuya look like a promising mafioso, rather than the treacherous liability that he is in reality.

A liability that spends day and night working to avoid having to make a choice. Or, at least, say it out loud.

After every corner of the ship has been ransacked and inspected, Chuuya finds himself in the office, giving Dazai one last report about it. It's strange to be on the other side of the desk instead of being the shadow behind the boss, but also oddly satisfying to get things done.

"Very well," Dazai says once he is finished talking. "The chapter Ace is officially closed now."

Chuuya nods.

Good riddance.

What's not so good is the deep silence that drapes over the room and the way Dazai's eye gleams in the subtle shape of a question mark. It's always there now, hanging in the air between every sentence and every pause, but try it as he might, Chuuya can't give him an answer. He has avoided doing it for the last seven days. What's one more?

So he diverts with a question himself. "Anything else?"

"Yes, actually. A lot of anything elses, Chuuya." Dazai slides a stack of files over the desk. "How do you feel about gems?"

“You mean actual ones?”

Dazai’s mouth curves in amusement. “Yes, the real thing.”

“They’re pretty…?”

“Well, if you think they’re pretty, how do you feel about taking over our gem business?”

He feels like Dazai is giving a lot of responsibility to someone who might not even be here in a few days.

“I’m not supposed to be the new Ace, am I?”

“Not exactly. Ace was involved in gems, yes, but he was mostly responsible for the casinos. I want you to open an entirely new market for us. It’s too good of a business not to invest in it, and you already have experience with smuggled goods, right?”

Right.

Aside from robberies and other low-end shit jobs, one of the sheep’s main source of income was raiding stolen goods from the docks and selling them to concessions or pawn shops. Sometimes the port mafia ended up on the other end of their stick.

Except now Chuuya would be the one making sure no one raids his shipment.

“So you basically want me to do to others, what you used to do us,” he summarizes, crossing his arms, and finishing it off with a sardonic sneer.

Dazai matches his smile – he always does, even though it’s less salt and bitterness, and more tart wine, always seeing the beauty in things. “It does have a nice, cosmically fateful ring to it, no?”

Scoffing, Chuuya snatches the file from the desk. “I think you just like being annoying.”

“I’ve compiled everything about our former operations and businesses in there, as well as some directions you could take in the future. What you do with it is for you to decide though. Perhaps you’ll see something I didn’t.” As if Dazai Osamu could ever miss something. “Do you need help with them?”

Chuuya’s lower lip aches to be chewed on as he lifts his eyes from the

thick stack of hours upon hours of work, not because of the actual task but because of the reading, to Dazai and the stupid bandages that hide nothing but another perfectly healthy eye. What is that about anyway? Chuuya will have to ask before –

He lets out a quick breath. “It will serve as good practice,” he says. “Will we still have that?”

“Unless you suddenly learned how to perfectly write and read, I don’t see any reason why we wouldn’t.”

Chuuya shoves down the stupid desire to ask whether that will still stand once he is no longer here – the boss of the mafia organization and his weekly lessons with someone from a rival organization like the sheep – but that would lead to other questions like what exactly does without any harm mean? No harm when they leave, but once they are two separate organizations, fighting and killing each other will be okay again? What about the two of them? Not their members, or their organizations, but them? What about Dazai’s stupid, mysterious plans? What about their lessons? What about that little magnet pole in Chuuya’s chest that pulls him towards Dazai every time they are in the same room? What about that?

Asking would mean actually talking about it though, and Chuuya doesn’t want to do that just yet.

“This gem business will probably keep me busy,” he adds. “And you’re you.”

The sight of Dazai getting up and walking around the desk sends Chuuya’s heart into overdrive even though the last time he leaped to hopeful conclusions, he ended up falling. Hard. Staying put proves to be the right decision when Dazai’s destination is the shelf behind him, not Chuuya.

“I will always have enough time for that,” Dazai tells him with the background sound of rustling and clattering. “And we are not done yet.”

Chuuya knows he means the lessons in literacy, but it’s impossible to overhear the echo of the double meaning in his words. We are not done yet. Just when, he wonders silently, they will be?

Dazai turns back to him with his arms folded behind his back again. The memory of him portraying the same nonchalance as now before dropping to one knee makes the hair on the back of Chuuya’s neck

already stand before the man even utters a word.

“By the way, I’m making you an executive.”

Yup, there it is.

Chuuya stares at him. Blinks. Then he stares some more.

Dazai lets him, as patient as ever.

“You can’t do this,” is what eventually comes out. A bit ragged. A bit all over the place with the emotional tones.

“I think I just did.”

“I’ve been here less than two months and I – I will --” Chuuya vigorously shakes his head, cutting himself off before the words actually tumble out like tiny wrecking balls.

“You will what?” Dazai coaxes gently.

“I will kill you.”

“Perhaps wait a few more months before trying to dethrone me. Establish trust in the organization. That kind of thing.”

“Someone will probably come for my head before that,” Chuuya snaps. “Are you trying to get people to think that I’m…” His lips curl. “That I’m getting favored by you to get all these benefits, or what the hell is it that you’re doing?”

“I am thinking that sooner or later you would have risen through the ranks anyway, so I might as well give you the title now.” Half-shrugging, Dazai leans against the edge of his desk and shoves his hands into the pockets of his ink-black slacks. “And let’s not pretend that you are scared of getting assassinated. You’re a bulletproof fight junkie. It will be like a good workout.”

“You’re assuming a lot of things for someone who gave me a choice not too long ago,” it finally bursts out of Chuuya. Does Dazai think his silence is the answer? That because he hasn’t made a choice yet, he will stay and continue playing this game forever?

“Executives come and go, Chuuya. I’m not binding you to anything.”

“Then why the hell did you make the deal to get Shirase out of prison in the first place?!”

Dazai replies with a silent tilt of his head.

And insanely enough, Chuuya is able to understand immediately. It's the same expression he gets whenever Dazai tells him that the only thing he has to do to unlock the answer to this question is unlock Dazai himself.

Thing is… if Chuuya decides to leave, he will never find out. This piece of his life, this Dazai-shaped box of secrets he couldn't possibly discover otherwise, would forever remain locked. Chuuya would move on with his life, no question about it, but he would always wonder.

"Do executives get special privileges?" Chuuya mutters, blessing the man with the most hateful glare in his inventory. "Like, say, pummeling their boss? Because I'd like to use it."

"As if special privileges have ever stopped you before," Dazai drawls.

He is right. Not too long ago Chuuya waltzed in here and felt the man's pulse throb under his fingers.

Chuuya isn't planning to repeat that – mostly because the temptation to see what that infuriating grin of his tasted like was too big. Though he does stroll forward, enjoying the undivided attention on him, and returns it with a saccharine smile before he steps on Dazai's foot. He makes sure to put his entire weight on it too, just for extra measure.

It puts Chuuya right into his personal space anyway, and if Dazai uses it to knock his other leg into him and make him stumble right into the space between his thighs – well, then that's just a miscalculated side-effect. A very, very poorly miscalculated side-effect considering how close exactly it brings them. So close that Dazai's heat surrounds him like a living kiln. So close that Dazai's soft exhale tickles his cheek. So close, that when Chuuya lifts his head and looks at him, less than a breath away, he is dizzy with it.

He could.

He could kiss Dazai until he gets sick from it, and Dazai would let him, and no one would ever know. He could do it just for the sake of having tried, so he won't have to wonder at least about this when he makes his decision.

His open palm lowers to Dazai's thigh, heavy, solid and warm, fingers curling ever so softly as a magnetic pull in the air drags Chuuya even closer. The invisible barrier that always exists between them quivers

and shakes, on the verge of shattering. Dazai stares back at him with one visible eye, the deep black of his pupil eclipsing any light and color, expression unreadable, then it flickers down from Chuuya's gaze to his lips, and his next breath shudders with tension, and there are still a few tiny millimeters of space between them to ignore this, but it ignites a hunger so feverish and bottomless in Chuuya, that he would have to carve it out with a blade for the slightest chance of withstanding it.

He has no knife.

And when the only choice lies between starving or this, he digs his fingers deeper into Dazai's thigh and brings his mouth to his.

The stack of files that he has been letting hover in the air drops to the ground. Somewhere deep inside, he feels like he is falling too as Dazai kisses him back, his lips shockingly soft when they slide against his. Wavering on his feet, Chuuya lifts his hand to Dazai's face, seizing his chin for control – or maybe to steady himself because this… this is like diving off the top of a building. Like feeling gravity stop a bullet inches from his chest, the promise of death and life mixing into something heady as the rush of adrenaline pumps through his veins and goes straight to his head, making him feel more alive than oxygen ever managed to do.

Then Dazai's hands slide down the length of his spine, finally *touching* him, and Chuuya's lungs rattle with the sudden rush of blood to his head. His chest hurts with the relentless slam of his heart against his ribcage, and he can barely breathe, but he kisses Dazai harder, surging into him like he's trying to crawl inside his skin, until his lips are swollen and bruised from the hunger and desperation that he's bleeding all over them as he chases anything he could possibly get because he damn well knows it's his only chance.

He has no idea whether his left hand accidentally knocks over some of the things cluttering Dazai's desk or whether it's his body's subconscious way of demanding more –

Dazai's fingers curve over the back of his thighs before he figures it out. Chuuya does the only reasonable thing to do at this moment and winds his arms around his neck, lets him pick him up, spin them around, and drop him on the desk in-between lips and teeth and tongue.

Chuuya's pulse is throbbing so wildly in his ears that he's sure he is

going to faint any second now, stealing air out of Dazai's mouth just so he can have another moment, another kiss, another ripple of goosebumps shudder through his bones as cold, long fingers cup his face and Dazai sucks on his bottom lip until he's parting his mouth with a broken groan in the back of his throat.

Another one.

Just another one, and then he'll stop –

Isn't that what every addict says? Isn't that how the spiel always goes? Another one, and another one, and just this one more, and then they wind up half-dead and broke in some dirty alleyway?

It physically hurts to draw away and press his nose into Dazai's cold cheek instead. His chest still heaves with each sobbing breath, making it hard to think past the roaring in his ears and the intoxicating proximity of Dazai and his lips.

But there shouldn't be much to think about anyway.

Chuuya knows now that Dazai's mouth tastes like frosty mint and remnants of sake that he must have had not too long ago. He knows that Dazai kisses reverently, each brush of lips just as powerful and as delicate as his words. He knows that Dazai gives as much as he takes.

And that should be enough.

It should not make him want even more.

But it does, and that's why he finally manages to push himself away. It causes a chain reaction. Fingers slip from Chuuya's face, his arms retreat into safety, and the intoxicating heat that he was just drowning in freezes, too.

He catches Dazai flexing and unflexing his hand from the corner of his vision. Knowing that as old and as brilliant as his soul might be, his body is still subjected to the same human urges as the rest of them is the only thing that sparks something remotely satisfied in Chuuya. The rest of him feels cold and bleak in the aftermath.

Considering he was the one to initiate this whole thing, there is probably a rule on social norms out there that states that he should say something, anything, to either explain the start or the ending. After every unsolved puzzle that Dazai has put him through though, Chuuya feels like he has earned the right to be the open-ended book

for once.

Let Dazai play the fool this time.

“Anyways,” Chuuya says after clearing his throat even though his voice still sounds like sandpaper. “I’m going to go now.” Slipping off the desk and coming down to earth, literally, he only allows himself to cast a fleeting glance in Dazai’s direction – or, well, his face because there is still a lot of his body in close proximity.

It’s an oddly withdrawn expression, full of invisible shadows.

But it quickly grows back into the breezy mask of amusement and casual brilliance when Chuuya picks up the files scattered across the floor, an accurate representation of his head, and tries to make a swift escape only to promptly run into his outstretched arm.

“You forgot something, you know.”

His eyes squeeze shut. He was going to be strong, to be good, but if Dazai asks for something more in that voice, Chuuya might just have to start being good tomorrow.

“Chuuya, are you waiting for something?” Dazai suddenly asks, deeply amused.

He comes back to reality to shoot the man a flippant scowl. “What did I forget?”

“This here.” By that, he means the thing in his hand that he nudges his head toward. A silver, round pin with a floral design carved into it. Chuuya accepts it. “It gets passed down every time someone becomes an executive. It won’t take long for everyone to know your status, but you can still carry it with you as a symbol of your rank.” Chuuya’s inspecting the drooping blossoms of the flower, both sorrowful and lithe at the same time when Dazai distances himself. “I was going to give it to you earlier, but you jumped me like a –”

“Thanks!” he snaps out, finally makes his escape with hasty, long strides.

He only lets himself breathe when he is in the safety of the elevator. Then he exhales, presses his forehead against the cool wall, and knocks his head against it.

(He only finds out that there are surveillance cameras in there way,

way later.)

***

Chuuya spends a day agonizing over the files about his task, frowning so hard that he ends up with an epic headache that knocks him out for the night. The next morning, he drops by the sheep's dorms and agonizes over whether he should tell Yuan and Shirase about Dazai's offer to leave the mafia. (And whether he should tell Yuan, only Yuan, about the kiss.) He ends up telling nobody anything, only tossing a bouncy ball at the wall again and again until he accidentally leaves a small dent, and they have to cover it up with a small picture.

He knows what his friends would say anyway.

Shirase would ask why they are still even standing here and discussing it when they could be long gone.

Yuan would probably wonder where the sudden shift in wind comes from first, but in the end, she would agree that they should take their chance before it's too late and leave. She might have adapted easier than the rest of them, but that's because she knew it was the only choice.

It's needless to imagine Luca's reaction.

And they all would be right.

There is no sane reason to delay making this choice. Not even the secrets of the universe should be enough to subject his friends to a path that they do not want and that they did not choose for themselves.

But maybe that's the problem. His whole life, the things that he wanted were the same things the sheep wanted. They are his family, his people, his organization. Of course, they always ran in the same direction – minor differences and disagreements obviously existed, but at the end of the day, it was them against the rest of the world, not them against each other.

And now Chuuya has slightly carried off course. The difference isn't big enough yet, so he can still turn back, and he can still be theirs and they can still be his. It's just that a small piece of him won't fit him anymore – and probably never again.

Since the sheep are busy for once, Chuuya checks on his new

subordinates – his army of misfits, as Dazai likes to call them. Pouring over the information about the gem market and coming up with strategies, he had the bright idea of incorporating these two worlds. He won't assign them anything crazy, but a guarding post and a loading job here and there seem reasonable enough.

A lot of the survivors already look way more chipper than the day before, greeting him with timid but existing smiles and chatting with him when he initiates conversations. The two hours he spends there leave him with a hopeful, albeit fleeting feeling. There is only so much he can do to help these people before…

Well, before he has to abandon them.

He wonders whether Dazai will end up getting rid of them just like he wanted to from the start.

He wonders how someone so cold can kiss so feverishly.

***

He's climbing off his motorcycle when his phone starts vibrating against his butt. Pressing it to his ear, he saunters up the stairs of the main headquarter entrance. "Yeah?"

"It's Gin. The boss requests your presence."

"Wouldn't it be easier to call me himself?" he grumbles.

"… he is a busy man."

"Fine. I'll be there in five."

"Do you know where our gardens are?"

The name sparks a memory, probably because Kouyou mentioned it when she showed him around. It's been a while, though, and the tower is ginormous. "Remind me again?"

It's a path to the basement and through the mafia tunnels that connect the main building to the other four. Chuuya's never been down here, so he feels like a kid on a field trip, especially with Gin in his ear – even if he does most of the talking.

After a ten-minute trek, he climbs up a staircase and steps into, what feels like, a painting, one of those hanging on the walls of the museums that he sneaked into now and then, with thick, textured

brushstrokes and an excess of overflowing, vibrant colors that try to burst through its canvas, just like the sea of rose bushes flush with pastel blossoms, the flowering trees, and in the middle of it all Dazai, seated at a small sun-bleached table with a cup of tea between his fingers, don't belong in a place like Yokohama's demonic nest.

It's disorienting.

"Finally decided to leave your cave?" Chuuya asks once he recovers from the shock of nature and stomps towards the man who ordered him here. Into a rose garden. Just the two of them.

He was not going to put more meaning into it than there is. So they kissed. So Chuuya felt like dying when they did. Adult people do that all the time, and still go their separate ways at the end of the day.

But being invited to a secret courtyard and having tea together makes his head rattle with question marks.

"I go outside," Dazai replies with a lilt in his voice. His chin tips towards the other side of his table, telling him to take a seat. A ladybug lands on the gauze around his wrist. "Sometimes."

Chuuya only raises his brows.

"My office is being cleaned right now."

"Ah." Chewing on his lip, he sits down, absently dragging the accessory ring around his index finger back and forth. "Do you need something?"

"Yes, yes, always straight to business. Do you remember the traffic organization that you crushed two years ago?"

That makes him abandon his fidgeting to frown at Dazai. Of course, he remembers. Even the thought of it leaves an acid taste on his tongue.

"What about them?"

"I have received word that they are back."

"Not possible," Chuuya says, shaking his head. "We took care of every last one of them."

Dazai takes a sip of his tea before speaking. "And you saw everyone's corpse, too?"

Chuuya's mouth opens to confirm but –

Ichirou Harikae.

Grimacing, he huffs out a breath. "We never found his body, but there was also no way he could have lived. We burned their base to the ground, Dazai. After I was done with them."

"Unfortunately, Chuuya, cockroaches always find a way to survive." He slides the iPad that's been lying on the table over to him, letting him take a look. The familiar face on the screen makes his fingers curl his hands into fists. How? "Ichirou Harikae has been spotted in Osaka two days ago. He's going by Kage now,"

"Just him, or…?"

The wordless look he receives from Dazai confirms it.

Fuck.

"I owe someone a favor, so I'm going to take care of it. I want you to help me."

Chuuya meets his gaze without flinching. "Just say the word. I'm ready to go whenever."

"You and the sheep," Dazai adds.

"The more ability users, the better." He blinks. "Why the sheep?"

"Because we're not going as the mafia but as a favor. No abilities. And since all of you are already experts…" Dazai inclines his head, not having to finish the sentence.

"Is everything just a business interaction to you? A favor?"

Dazai's eye bleeds colors as the sun sets behind him, bleeds honesty when he says, "not everything."

Chuuya tears his gaze away and lets it swing over the garden instead, even the lethal beauty of thorny roses is easier to look at. Taking an inauspicious team to Osaka might be smarter, but the mafia has a dozen low-ranking combative members that could simply leave their black suit at home for the trip. What Dazai is doing is offering him a hand. He promised, he vowed to make the sheep his people and now he is making it a reality.

“Okay,” Chuuya tells him.

Dazai’s grin dances. “Wonderful. Gather the people that you need and be ready by nightfall. We leave at midnight.”

Chapter End Notes

> I might be cruel sometimes but I'm not a complete monster.... and I mean, after 100k all of us deserved that kiss. I hope you savored and enjoyed it because that is by far not the resolution of their sexual tension, and it will get worse before it gets better. Thank you for reading, have a wonderful day, and I'm super excited to hear thots and opinions <3

Chapter 16: Balancing Forces

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Are we seriously going to spend six hours squeezed into this tiny car?”

Chuuya glances in the rearview mirror to see Shirase glare right back at him.

“Why are you complaining?” Yuan asks. “You don’t have to sit in the middle.”

“Yeah, because I should be sitting in the front. I’m, like, the bulkiest out of you three beanpoles. I need the most space!”

“Your paunch doesn’t make you bulky.”

“Huh?”

Although Chuuya rarely finds himself complaining about things like car sizes, he does wonder why Dazai couldn’t have, at least, given them a van or something like that, if only so he wouldn’t have to listen to this for the next few hours. The only one who has been suspiciously quiet is Luca, too busy staring out of the window instead of engaging in the never-ending dog fight between their other two friends.

Asking Luca to come as well will back-fire somehow, he’s sure of it, but two years ago it was the four of them together that put an end to Ichirou’s organization – or so they thought – hence the council that was formed afterwards. What Luca thinks of Chuuya at the moment doesn’t matter. He played a part then, he’ll have to play his part now, too.

Who knows, maybe this will even bring all of them back together again.

Or maybe Chuuya is simply a fool who refuses to take off his clown shoes.

With his eyes closed, he is just about to let the bickering in the back seat lull him to sleep when the car comes to a stop. The night bathes

the world in darkness, but the place in front of them is full of twinkling lights, illuminators and wide, long runways.

They are at the airport.

A private jet standing in front of them.

“We’re traveling by plane?” Yuan asks.

Chuuya meets her eyes with an equally puzzled look. “Apparently?”

“Why do you not know that?” Shirase huffs as they all get out of the car. “You should know that. Are you sure we’re not walking into some kind of trap? Because I’m still pretty certain I watched Ichirou burn.”

“I saw a photo of him,” Chuuya mutters for the 6th time today. “He is alive.”

“And how do you know the photograph isn’t fabricated, huh?”

“Shirase, if the port mafia wanted us dead, then we would have been dead a month ago already. You wanted more space, now you’ll have more.”

“That jet doesn’t look that big, to be honest… ouch!” Shirase’s grumbling trails off into an offended yelp. “Stop hitting me!”

“Stop being annoying!” Chuuya hears Yuan hiss back before she jogs up next to his side a moment later. “So will the boss be joining us or…?”

That question dissolves into thin air when the person in question chooses that moment to descend the airstairs. Dazai has forgone the usual scarf and coat, only wearing an ink-black button-up, sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and matching slacks – and the bandages, of course. Anyone who would wrap themself in gauze would appear fragile. Weak. On Dazai, they look like battle armor.

Chuuya’s breath comes out in a foggy shudder as Dazai receives them with a face full of empty smiles that never reach his one visible eye.

“You can go onboard and make yourselves comfortable. We will depart in ten minutes.”

There is not much more that needs to be said, so the sheep trudge up the stairs to the jet without much feedback. Or maybe none of them trust Dazai enough to speak to him. Probably both.

Chuuya doesn't have to say anything either, yet he still finds himself lingering, searching for something on Dazai's face that will reveal whether he is trying to make compromises or whether he is already a hundred steps ahead in the future and they are only a fly in his web of schemes.

"Any concerns?" Dazai asks.

"Should there be?" Chuuya wants to know in return.

"I'm not a fan of your little lambs, but I am more than capable to leave any personal feelings aside to focus on the job. The question is whether they are."

"They are," he reassures Dazai. Shirase can complain all day long, but at the end of the day he will still come through because he cares. Deeply. And Luca had too much of a personal stake in this last time. No matter how many things have changed, he will do the job. It's why he agreed to come in the first place.

Dazai's gaze remains on him a moment longer, feeling like a mental caress of fingers what with the soft gleam in his eye, before he nods towards the plane. "It's cold. You should go inside."

"Well, then so should you," Chuuya mutters, and his chest flutters when he feels the weight of Dazai's hand on his back. "Did you know this is my first time flying?"

"I know for a fact it's not."

"It is."

"Do you know who had to clean up the mess after someone broke one of our jets and killed our men several thousand kilometers up in the air? Me. It was me, Chuuya."

A snort slips out of him. "Okay, fine, that happened. But it doesn't count! I was on the plane for less than a minute. It wasn't actually flying."

"So I get to be your first? What an honor."

Chuuya hates how easily it is for Dazai to make something so simple sound so fucking dirty – and he hates that his body betrays him and reacts with floundering heat. "Never mind," he says, entering the plane and curiously glancing around. "I already flew before."

A flight attendant comes striding down the short but obscenely luxurious gangway and greets them with a bow of her head. “Will the two of you be the last passengers, sir?”

“Yes, we’re complete,” Dazai tells her and shoots Chuuya an amused glance before brushing past him. “You have to sit down for take-off. In case you don’t know flying etiquette.”

“I know th—” His irritation stumbles to a stop when fingers seize his wrist. Yuan keeps him from going anywhere with a silent but stubborn grin on her lips. Ahead of him, Dazai has gone on to sit on the other end of the jet. They were just talking. Staying here without another word feels weird, wrong somehow, but these are his friends --

For a moment, Chuuya isn’t on a plane but on a road with a fork in the path, the sheep in one direction and Dazai in the other. Choosing one, no matter which one, will leave him incomplete in one way or another. Always looking back over his shoulder and wondering what would have happened if he had taken the other. Always searching for the missing piece.

How is that a choice?

It’s bullshit is what it is.

Then he blinks, shakes off his vivid imagination, and takes the last place in the four-seater with his friends. It’s just a seat. Not a major, life-changing decision. Not right now anyway.

Yuan stretches out her arms, then rests her head against her seat with a deep sigh. “I hope there will be turbulences. I heard it’s like riding a roller coaster.”

“Don’t say that,” Shirase mutters and immediately knocks on the wood of the table three times. “You’ll freaking jinx us.”

“Duh, that’s the point.”

“You say that now, but don’t come crying to me when it actually happens and you’re not that brave anymore.”

“First of all, I’d come crying to Chuuya’s help first, and second, I won’t because I’ve spent enough time at the fair and dropping off buildings with this one here to be scared by a few turbulences.”

Suddenly Shirase’s wide eyes skitter to him. “Can you save us if

something happens?"

"If you ask me nicely," Chuuya says with a smirk.

He isn't sure, at first, how much Dazai's ability could affect his. But when Chuuya concentrates on the shape of everything around him, he feels no obstacles that would be in his way. So yes, if anything happens, Chuuya could keep them afloat.

"I shouldn't have to! We're friends!"

"Are you, though?" Luca says under his breath while flipping through a magazine.

For so few words, their effect on the mood is immediate, the air growing dense and heavy before the plane has even had the time to take off.

Chuuya has the urge to shift, get up, punch someone in the face, but he forces himself to stay put. "Yeah, I'm pretty sure we are."

"Whatever you say, your highness." Then Luca lifts his eyes long enough to shoot him a cold sneer. "Or is it executive Nakahara now?"

Shirase's head snaps back and forth between them. "Wait. For real?"

"You didn't hear? Chuuya is playing the big game now."

Somewhere under the table, something gets kicked. Shirase lets out a high-pitched shriek before glowering at Yuan with wide eyes. "What was that for?"

For once, her face isn't glowing with pride and satisfaction. "That was supposed to be for him." The hiss gets directed at Luca. When he replies with a dirty look, Yuan doubles down, wordlessly staring in the direction behind them where Dazai is sitting, telling him to shut up before he says something he will regret saying in front of the arguably most powerful man in the city. "I was trying to distract myself because I didn't want to spend the entire flight thinking about the fact that this whole time Ichirou has been alive and active –" Her voice cracks a little, but she continues like it didn't. "— but even that, is better than listening to this."

The pilot announcing they're ready for take-off over the stereo cuts through the oppressive silence that falls over them. Chuuya sinks into his seat and lets his eyes wander as the machine starts moving

towards the runway, anywhere but on the guy sitting across from him.

It just so happens that the only thing interesting enough to hold his attention in his current field of vision is Dazai. He is immersed in the screen of the laptop in front of him. His fingers move every now and then, tapping away at the keyboard, but his expression stays entirely the same the whole time, not a single flicker of visible emotion passing through him.

Chuuya remembers the shadows that clung to him after the kiss. He wonders what kind of thoughts were running through Dazai's restless mind when Chuuya pressed his lips to his. Was it a means to an end? Something he only reciprocated to keep Chuuya tied to him for a few more days, weeks, months? Was it satisfying physical needs, giving in to attraction? Or maybe it was just another bullet point on a list of some genius grand strategy. Because it sure as hell isn't anything as mundane as infatuation.

Love has no place in the game of power. Even Chuuya knows that.

The plane's engines roar as they fire up and accelerate. The heady rush of adrenaline when they thunder over the runway is exciting for about a total of one minute before they lift off the ground and the whole experience gets boring again. Shirase complains that his ears are clogged, Luca keeps flipping through magazines, and Yuan starts watching some movie on the iPad that's provided by the plane.

Belatedly, Chuuya realizes he could have brought the files on the gem market to use the time to work through them. He steals another glance in Dazai's direction and finds himself frowning when he sees that the flight attendant that was walking around and offering them drinks and snacks three seconds ago is now seated across from him. Chuuya can't see her face, but he definitely hears her giggle. Loudly.

Pretty unprofessional to just sit down in the middle of a job if you ask him. And for what? Flirting?

He bulldozes his eyes away and to Yuan, leaning into her space until she offers him one part of the headphones and slides the iPad between them.

It's a romantic drama about a man that is in love with a friend but won't tell her in fear of ruining their friendship. So he silently watches her date other guys the entire time.

After ten minutes of that, Chuuya decides he doesn't like the movie.

Yuan sighs and plugs out her earphones as well. “Just eat something.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“You always turn into a fidgeting monster when you are.”

“I’m not fidgeting.”

Yuan pointedly looks at his feet, tapping the ground with a hundred beats per minute, and then back at him. Not a word is spoken, but the point is made anyway.

Chuuya rolls his eyes. “I told the flight attendant I don’t want anything, and now she is busy.”

Sometimes he underestimates how observant his friend is because within the span of a heartbeat, her expression shifts from gentle exasperation to surprised understanding – of what exactly he isn’t so sure himself. To his relief, Yuan continues communicating with him without any words. To his dismay, she raises her hand and brazenly calls over the poor stewardess.

“Could I please get a coke?” At least, she is polite.

Then her sharp elbow slams into his diaphragm and Chuuya takes that back. He has to school his pained wince before telling the flight attendant that he would like to get the meal from earlier, after all.

Having something to do helps him combat the restless energy buzzing through his veins. Only for a while, though. As soon as he is done, his fingers start tapping hectic rhythms into his skin again, so Chuuya decides that he should try to sleep like Luca and Shirase.

That doesn’t work.

Not even few minutes later, Chuuya has to stifle a loud and bored sigh as his eyes flutter open again. Aside from the steady hum of the plane engine, it’s quiet. He rests his head against the back of his seat and ends up looking at Dazai again.

This time, he doesn’t think about all the ways in which Dazai could be deceiving him, or how stupid he looks flirting with the flight attendant. This time, he sees Dazai absently stare out of the window, and his entire heart just sinks.

Chuuya doesn’t really understand why. There is nothing inherently

sad about the image of a man looking out of the window. But sitting here, with his friends who might snap at him like dogs half the time, sure, but who also argue over turbulences and share headphones with him while Dazai spends the entire flight alone makes Chuuya's chest fill with so much heavy lead that he fears he might break through the floor, not even his ability enough to catch him.

He swallows down nerves and agitation alike and tells Yuan that he's going to the bathroom. She replies that she doesn't really need to know that. And she is right but telling her where he is going was not the point of his announcement. It was an excuse.

Because as soon as he is done in the bathroom and closing the door shut behind him, he sucks in a breath of courage and slyly slips into the seat across from Dazai.

"Hi."

There.

Dazai is not alone anymore, and Chuuya doesn't have to suffer from the suffocating weight of pity around his throat.

When Dazai lifts his head, he doesn't look surprised, he rarely does, but there is a gentle lift to his expression. "Hello."

Most of the time that they spend together, there is always something to discuss: mafia business, missions, life-or-death matters. Now that Chuuya is supposed to just talk to him without having a reason to do so, he falters. It doesn't help that his heartbeat is so goddamn loud in his ears he can barely hear his own thoughts.

"So who is this person that you owe a favor?" he ends up asking.

Dazai exhales softly and stretches out his arms before crossing them behind his head, eyes fluttering closed. "A family friend."

Chuuya's frown is futile because Dazai isn't even looking, but he can't help it anyway. "Someone else's family?"

"Mine."

Huh.

Now that is one odd piece of information that Chuuya doesn't know what to do with.

Dazai blinks lazily. “Is that really so shocking?”

“Yes,” he replies frankly because it is. “I guess I assumed that you were a street rat before joining the mafia. Isn’t that how most people end up there?” When you’ve got no family and no money, the mafia looks like a tempting offer to give you both, only for the small price of your soul.

“A lot of people, yes. Others are born into it.”

So Dazai was born into it. Interesting.

“Your parents -- they’re in the mafia, too?” His eyes widen ever so slightly with another guess. “Is Hirotsu-san your father?”

Then Dazai does something Chuuya never, not in a million years, expected him to do: he barks out a laugh. A loud one. It’s startling in its honesty, and Chuuya’s fairly sure it will wake up Luca and Shirase, but somehow, he decides that it’s worth it.

He ends up silencing himself by coughing into his fist and murmuring, “Apologies. You just caught me by surprise with that.”

“Now imagine that multiplied by 100,” Chuuya crosses his arms to hide the silly, little feeling called fondness gushing around in his chest, “and congratulations, you will know what it’s like talking to yourself.”

“I would rather stick with Chuuya’s surprises.”

Haaaa…

“So Hirotsu-san is not your father.”

“No. No, he’s not.”

“But someone is?”

“My father is dead,” Dazai says and puts an end to that line of thinking.

“Oh,” Chuuya says. “I’m sorry.”

Dazai’s shoulder lifts casually. “I’m not.”

Parents that must have been in the mafia, and not particularly good ones apparently.

“You’ve been in the business your whole life then?”

“Chuuya’s being very selfish,” Dazai announces and evades the answer. “A good and healthy relationship is about taking and giving, you know.”

“I give.” He knows damn well that he’s taking the bait that Dazai is dangling right in front of him, but his assumption is, frankly, insulting, especially after a kiss that should have proven the opposite. “I’m a very good giver if you really have to know.”

Dazai tilts his head. “Oh?”

“Yeah.”

“Do tell me more about how good you are at giving, Chuuya. I’m really interested in hearing.”

“I fucking bet you are,” Chuuya huffs and is astounded to hear how steady his voice sounds despite the heat in his chest. “You have no right to talk about being selfish when you probably have a file with my entire life on it while I don’t even know your age.”

Throwing one leg over the other, Dazai laces his fingers together. Sighs. “How about tit for tat then? If you want to know something, you will also have to reveal something of your own. Since you are such a good giver.”

Chuuya clicks his tongue. “What could I possibly tell you that you don’t already know?”

“That is the point. Surprise me ~”

Blowing air out of his cheeks, he lets his head drop back against the cushioned seat and thinks. He does that for a few minutes.

Then Chuuya looks at Dazai and waves an irritated hand in his direction. “Fine. The taste of coconut makes me gag except when it’s in curry.”

It’s a very nonsensical thing to admit but coming up with something about himself is way harder than it sounds like.

“Twenty,” Dazai says.

Chuuya’s eyes narrow. Is that supposed to be an answer or a question? And then –

I don't even know your age.

Dazai is twenty years old.

Same as him.

"I hate musicals and think they should be banned from any stage."

The corner of Dazai's mouth twitches before he replies. "This spot here –" He nods towards the table between them. "— has been annoying me for the last hour or so, and it makes me want to sell the entire jet just so I will never have to look at it again."

"Wow," Chuuya can't help but say. "Dramatic much?"

"Hey, you don't see me judging your opinions about musicals."

"Because I'm right. You're just dramatic."

As interesting as these odd facts are, they are not really substantial. Not enough to work on the puzzle called Dazai Osamu.

Though Chuuya supposes the things he has been giving weren't really deep either. So maybe… maybe he has to set an example.

Wrestling his arms back until they're clutching his seat overhead, he sinks deeper. Just not deep enough to rip out roots that are too fragile.

"I thought that you were an old, wrinkly man when the port mafia came to make a deal with us. And that you had ten wives and husbands."

That's deep, right?

"And you didn't mind being part of my harem?" Dazai questions with a slow grin.

"I wish I was only one of eleven," Chuuya tells him. "It would have made my life so much easier."

"Ah, ah, ah, Chuuya, something tells me getting only 1/11th of someone's attention would not sit well with you."

"Think what you want. By the way, I haven't forgotten that you still haven't given me anything."

“Of course, how could I? Let’s see… ah, I am deeply afraid of heights.”

Chuuya stares at him. “You’re joking.”

“Do I look like I am joking?”

“Yes. All the time.”

“I am many things, but I am not a liar and I do hold my ends of the deals I make. Whether you want to believe it or not is up to you.”

It’s not that Chuuya thinks he’s lying. It just doesn’t make any sense. Dazai and afraid of heights? They’re extremely high up in the air right now and he looks fine, not even a single drop of sweat on his forehead. Not to mention that he was looking out of the window earlier. Or that he spends all his time on the 33rd floor.

Yet all it does is make Chuuya want to dig deeper, set his claws into Dazai’s skin until he finds the pieces of truths that hold him together.

Maybe that’s why he says, “Ace thought I was some kind of animal that he could tame. It wasn’t just about punishment. He wanted to break me.”

Not because it’s something that keeps him up at night – it doesn’t, not really, but it’s still something that Chuuya would rather not think about it if he can because it reminds him too much of a question that he never found the answer to himself.

That has to get something bigger out of Dazai. Something of equal weight.

“I spent most of my childhood in the port mafia, yes,” Dazai tells him in return, answering a question from before. “I ran away once, but I came back and assisted someone in my father’s death. I never left again after that.”

It sure is heavy, the weight of someone’s secrets.

There was no particular reason for asking about Dazai’s childhood. Chuuya was curious, surprised to hear that he had a family at all. That’s it. So there is no particular reaction to give Dazai either.

Most people would probably think of this kind of admission as something precious and fragile, breakable glass that will shatter if you

are not careful. To people like them, to Chuuya and to Dazai, it's just another fact. No more and no less important than Dazai's fear of heights.

Chuuya drums his fingers against his seats, thinking about what piece of himself to offer next. Before he can come up with something, the flight attendant leans down to Dazai with a polite smile. "We're going to start the descend now, so it would be best if you remain in your seats from now on, sir."

Dazai nods and sends her off with an empty smile.

"I… am going to go back," Chuuya tells him. Something as trivial shouldn't make the words so hard to say, but the thing about Dazai is that he has a habit of turning everything on its head. Making awful things good, and simple things hard. Almost as if he was the one with the skill to manipulate gravity instead of the skill to keep it exactly as it is.

"And I am going to stay," Dazai says like they are still playing the game of tit for tat truths.

It makes Chuuya bite his cheek to stop a smile from spreading as he pushes himself up to his feet. His friends will already jump to enough conclusions because of this little stunt if he doesn't come back grinning like an idiot.

Or Yuan will since she seems to be the only one awake to see him slump back in his seat and stare off into the distance. It's silent but he can feel the weight of his friend's stare drill into the side of his face, so he sighs and looks at her. "What?"

"Nothing." Unlike the word, her expression is full of things. "Did he say something about the traffic organization?"

"Nothing that I haven't told you already."

"Okay."

Chuuya hums in reply.

There is space for Yuan to ask more, and she looks like she wants to, but she must decide against it when she grabs the iPad instead and starts playing the movie again. She tilts it just enough so they can both see the screen. Even though the plot makes him roll his eyes, he rests his cheek on his fist for support and spends the rest of the flight

watching some poor fictional bastard pine for a woman he supposedly loves.

Half an hour later, they are climbing down the stairs of the plane in the Kansai international airport, accompanied by the night wind and Shirase's endless complaining about how much his ears were hurting during the descent. On the ground, there are already two black cars waiting for them, next to them two young women in traditional clothing who immediately tend to their bags and then usher the sheep into one of the cars.

Dazai gently yanks Chuuya back by the collar of his jacket before he can follow his friends. "I have something to take care of right now, so we will see each other tomorrow in the morning when we discuss how we are going to do this." He nudges his chin towards the car. "These are the people of the family friend I told you about. Her name is Natsume Tomoko. She will host us in her residence while we are in town."

While Dazai is already in the future, Chuuya has latched onto the opening statement. "You're going somewhere? Alone?"

"Yes," Dazai says with a slow smile that looks like he has a direct link to every single thought that crosses Chuuya's mind.

"Don't you need a bodyguard in that case?" No matter how many layers of gauze cover him at all times, his body is still made of fragile skin that can get pierced by pretty much anything. Unlike Chuuya, Dazai is far from bulletproof.

"Is Chuuya offering?"

"If I have to," he mutters, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jacket and glancing down at his feet kicking the pavement. "Just seems kinda risky to me, you know."

He hears Dazai exhale a quiet huff of laughter that the wind carries away a second later. "You are welcome to accompany me if that's what you want, but you don't have to." He doesn't say it, but he doesn't have to when Chuuya sees the way Dazai's eye slides past him and to the car with the sheep inside.

"You really are trying," Chuuya finds himself observing out loud even though it was supposed to be only a thought. Trying to find a place for both Chuuya and the sheep. Trying to make them stay.

“I told you,” Dazai says looking him in the eye. “I keep my vows.”

Chuuya searches for the truth in his face for a moment, then gives up and huffs out a breath. “Then promise to be careful. Because I won’t be there to save your sorry ass tonight.”

To his surprise, Dazai responds by offering him his pinky finger.

Chuuya looks at it flatly and raises his brow. “What am I supposed to do with that?”

“It’s a pinky promise…?”

“A what?”

“A…” Dazai lowers his hand again and presses his lips together. “I will be back in the morning. Good night, Chuuya.”

This time, Shirase has managed to hog the passenger seat to himself, so Chuuya squeezes himself next to Yuan and informs his friends about the current state of affairs. He hears Luca let out a snide snort, but it’s the only thing he contributes. Otherwise all of them just seem to be pretty worn out from fitful naps on the plane and the concern over tomorrow’s task.

It’s still dark when the car comes to a stop but despite the pitch-black color of the cloudy night sky, their destination is impossible to miss: a huge traditional mansion that seems to stretch over an entire piece of land, the entrance lit up with torches, and surrounded by a sea of plum smoketrees that look like they are burning smoke.

“Places like these are always too good to be true,” Chuuya hears Shirase mumble behind him. “Let’s go back.”

“Have fun walking back to Yokohama,” Yuan mutters.

The gates open then, and an older woman, accompanied by more staff, comes out. Her steps are so light, it looks like she floats over to them instead of walking. Even the air around her seems to be moving in a gentle flow with her like she is less human and more wind. More earth. More element. Her eyes land on him, and Chuuya has the distinct sensation of being stripped bare to his very soul.

“You must be the Nakahara boy and his company.” Hands folded together; she gives him a bow. “I am Natsume Tomoko. Welcome to my residence.”

Compared to her, Chuuya's bow, as well as the ones of his friends, must look clumsy and stiff, but he counters it by pulling his shoulders back and offering his firmest smile. "Thank you for having us, Natsume-san."

"Come. I will show you your rooms for tonight. I'm sure you are tired from the journey." The staff is carrying their luggage, so there really is no other choice but to follow her. "Unfortunately, I only have three rooms available, so you will have to share them in pairs. Rest assured that there will be more than enough space for everyone."

"That's fine," Chuuya says. If anything, having to share a room with only one other person instead of ten is a luxury. Or, well, it used to be to him.

Fingers wrap around his wrist then, Yuan sidling up to him with a jutted-out chin before quietly declaring, "I call dibs on you."

He just snorts in reply.

The inside of the residence is just as delicate as the exterior. Spacious rooms, expensive tatami mats, and fine, though somewhat eccentric artworks hanging on the walls. After they decline Natsume's offer to have a late-night meal and after she shows them their rooms and where to get ready for the night, they are pretty much left alone to their devices.

Chuuya checks his phone for any missed calls while Yuan is in the bathroom. Since there aren't any, he shrugs out of his clothes and slips into the plain black yukata that Natsume provided them with, still feeling traces of energy buzzing through his veins even though it's three in the morning by now. He's threading his fingers through his hair when the doors slide open and shut as Yuan slips inside, then collapses on her futon.

"I'm so tired I could just die right now," her muffled voice says. "You'll have to perform CPR on me tomorrow to wake me up."

Chuuya snorts. "A bucket of ice water will do the trick too."

Yuan lifts her head to shoot him a warning glare. "Don't you dare."

"I don't really feel like cracking your ribs either."

"At least a cracked rib or two would give me a break from Kouyou."

“But Kouyou’s not here.”

“She might as well be. She told me I’ll have to catch up once I’m back like I’m taking a damn vacation here! I’m doing things! Important things!”

Chuuya’s smile wanes a little at the reminder of why they are here in the first place. “I can’t believe Ichirou has been alive all this time.”

“Yeah.” Yuan’s tone sounds dim as well. “Every time I think about it, I start to blame us for not looking harder for him last time. Maybe if he had…”

“The chances of surviving that kind of fire were practically impossible,” he reminds not only Yuan but himself, too. In the end, they did everything possible back then. They just have to make sure not to make the same mistake again.

“I know,” Yuan sighs and tilts her gaze up to look at him. “Aren’t you tired?”

“Not really. I feel like I haven’t done anything today.”

“Workaholic,” she mutters. “Sleep.”

Chuuya wouldn’t call himself a workaholic, just someone who prefers to be active throughout the day, but Yuan is probably right that he should get enough rest before tomorrow. He can’t be tired tomorrow, or full of useless guilt, or distracted and make mistakes again. After nearly downing an entire bottle of water, he turns off the lights and crawls under the sheets.

“Night.”

Yuan is already knocked out.

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Chuuya wakes up because his throat feels like it’s drying out. However, when he reaches for the bottle next to him, he finds it empty. Stifling an annoyed groan building in his chest, he drops his head and stares at the dark ceiling as he contemplates whether he should ignore the thirst and go back to sleep or get up and get himself water.

He lies there for several moments before letting out a sigh and sitting

up to orient himself. According to his phone, it's still early in the morning, 5:13. A dreadful time to be wandering the hallways of a house that he isn't familiar with, but he can't for the life of him ignore the scratchy feeling in his throat, so getting up it is.

He tries to tiptoe through the room and slip outside as quietly as possible as to not wake up Yuan, then starts making his way in the direction of the kitchen, hoping that his half-sleeping brain isn't deceiving his sense of direction. There are candles on the walls, lighting his way, which is why he doesn't notice that he's not the only one not in his room until he almost walks past Natsume and Dazai, seated around a chabudai.

As their eyes land on him Chuuya stops in his tracks like a deer caught in the headlight – even if somewhere in the back of his mind he knows that getting himself a bottle of water is not forbidden.

"Uh, I want water," he more or less stammers out, scratching the back of his neck. "I mean, I wanted to get myself some water because my bottle's empty. I –" There are more apologies waiting to tumble out of his mouth, but Natsume clamps his lips shut with an easy smile and a nod directed at the jug of ice-clear water on the chabudai.

"A body needs what it needs, Nakahara-kun. Why don't you join us?"

Chuuya swallows, sneaks a glance at Dazai and –

Dazai's eyes are uncovered, both of them. Surrounded by the candles guttering around him, they look like two crimson-burning embers. Not the angry, violent kind, but a steady wavering of charcoal and heat. Comforting. Endless. Entrancing. Yet also animalistic in their intensity.

"I don't mean to intrude," Chuuya says, tearing his gaze away again.

"You aren't," Natsume tells him. "Sit."

So he does. Heart pounding a slightly erratic beat, he crosses the room and after a moment of hesitation takes a seat next to Dazai across from the older woman. He feels like the sound of him chugging down the glass of water that Natsume prepares for him is the loudest thing in the world, yet the entire time, the two act like they have expected him to join them all along.

"Nakahara-kun, has the lad here been treating you well?"

The way she utters the question, without a single wavering beat, makes it sound like they have already discussed this topic before, like they are two acquaintances that are catching up with each other instead of strangers that are talking for the almost very first time. But denying her an answer goes beyond a level of rudeness that Chuuya isn't willing to step down to.

"Uh, yeah." Natsume's truffle-colored eyes latch onto Chuuya and all but drag out more words out of his helpless mouth. "Dazai has been, uh, good. To me. Frustrating, and a pain in the ass, but… good."

The twinkling in her eyes deepens. "A frustrating pain in the ass you say? That sounds a lot like the child I remember. Osamu had the words trouble written on his forehead since the day he was born."

"Really?" Chuuya asks.

It's easy to forget that Dazai is still in the same room, barely an arm-length away, what with how soundless his breathing has been, but the small noise of protest by his side reminds Chuuya that he is very much here, violently so.

"Natsume-sensei, stop spreading shameless lies."

"Just because you chose to forget doesn't mean that these are lies," Natsume quips and lifts her cup of tea to her pale lips. "I spent years looking after you, I would know." Directing her smile at Chuuya then, she says, "He was a feral little thing. Like a wolf."

"Dazai?" Chuuya can't help but ask again. "This Dazai here was like a wolf?"

"A pup."

"I was not." Funnily enough, Dazai makes himself sound exactly like the child Natsume is describing at the moment. "And if I was, then only because my brain hadn't developed yet. Children are barely even people."

But the information that is now twinkling in the cosmos like a dwarf planet is too damn fascinating not to grab a telescope to have a better look at it. "When you say wolf, what exactly do you mean by that?" Chuuya even leans forward, refusing to let even the slightest image pass him by. "Did he bite people?"

"Among other things."

“What other things?”

“I wish we would return to the matter at hand,” Dazai announces.

“Child, you know very well that the present is both the past and future.” Natsume’s mouth is still loosely curled into a nostalgic smile, but her expression darkens ever so slightly. “I hadn’t seen Osamu for ten years before he took over as the head of the nest. You have changed, you’re not wrong about that, but you shouldn’t treat your inner child as someone different. He will always be with you whether you want to or not.”

Dazai’s sigh falls heavier than his previous ones, there for the sake of expressing his displeasure. “I will accept the brat when I no longer need a functioning head to keep the city afloat.”

“The head only works with a heart in place.” What sounds like a discussion that is being held not for the first time comes to an abrupt halt when Natsume reaches for her teacup, eyes sliding over both Dazai and Chuuya. Her hands still. Then they return to her lap, the tea abandoned. “I see. Perhaps it works this way as well for now, but I would be careful. The universe is made up of balancing forces. Every burst of light needs its shadow, and every head needs a heart. By itself, it falls apart.”

“So you’ve told me.”

The look that flickers over Natsume’s face is almost stricken but she sniffs it out and lets the wax melt into acceptance. “Very well. Shall we cast the question now?”

A lot of the things that Chuuya has been privy to hear just now didn’t make much sense without context, but this here finally makes the carefully schooled mask of understanding explode into a painfully obvious frown that sparkles with confusion.

“Natsume sensei is a seer,” Dazai explains, his tone dripping amusement.

Chuuya lets his gaze swivel between both of them. “A foretelling ability?”

“That’s the simplified term for it, child.” After taking a sip of her tea, she lowers the cup back to the chabudai. “The future is both the past and the present. It’s fluid, constantly shifting and moving like water. There is no way to foresee it even with a gift as mine. What I can see

is the currents of time and the direction in which it flows in, and even those, are still matters of interpretation."

Is that why she was not surprised to see Chuuya barge in on them? She saw something like this playing out in the future?

And then his eyes snap to his side. Is that how Dazai is always ten steps ahead of everyone?

"Natsume sensei can only interpret one question per lunar month," Dazai says a moment later. "I'm going to cast mine if you want to watch."

"It sounds kind of personal," Chuuya mutters, interlacing his fingers and squeezing them, "but sure."

"Only fair to even the scales between us, no?" Dazai's smile is slow and smoldering, even now.

Natsume wipes it off him by offering, "you can both cast a question if that's what you wish. People come to see me together all the time."

"Why would they do that?" It's one of these questions that look like low-hanging fruit dangling from the tree only to reach for them and step into a net instead. That realization, however, comes too late to save Chuuya.

"Couples want to know how their chances stand. Oftentimes it's about fertility and building a family."

Chuuya stammers out a laugh, loud and strained, as he scratches the back of his head. "We're obviously not trying to have children. Or anything of that sort." Nor are they a couple but voicing that would make matters even more awkward.

"Alone, please, Natsume-sensei," Dazai says in a gently exasperated tone before he lifts his hands from his lap to offer them to Natsume and Chuuya blinks rapidly because of the handcuffs around his wrists. "As was the plan from the very start."

It only makes sense when the older woman takes hold of them and a bright greenish glow appears around their joined hands. This is an ability. Although never verbally confirmed, the fact that Dazai is some kind of nullifier has become an irrefutable truth by now.

And these handcuffs are the same ones that Chuuya had to wear

already twice times too many.

Not daring to breathe, he watches them.

"Tell me where the rat is," Dazai murmurs softly.

Chuuya frowns at the question, having never heard him mention any rat before. He's not even sure whether that's an actual name or someone that Dazai considers a traitor.

A moment passes.

“First motif drawn. A tree drops its leaves early, growing sprigs in the soil. The subject takes a position.” Tree, sprigs, soil… that sounds fairly good, right? Sneaking a glance at Dazai makes him reconsider that conclusion because his eyes are hard and narrowed. “There is a theme of rebellion,” Natsume continues. “Sides will be chosen.”

“In my own ranks?” Dazai asks.

“You know I have no answers. Only interpretations.”

“I know, I know. I’m just thinking out loud. It could mean something entirely else depending on who is the subject.”

Rebellion, it echoes in Chuuya’s heart chambers. Sides.

Is she talking about him? About the sheep? Maybe they're all rats? *He* is?

Natsume nods before her eyelids fall closed again. “Second motif drawn. A chameleon changes colors to adapt to surroundings; objects do not see it for what it is. Trickery is at play.”

“A chameleon stands for deceptions,” Dazai muses without much thinking.

“Rebellion and deception,” Natsume confirms. “They do not necessarily refer to the same event, but caution would be wise. Someone is not who they say they are.”

Dazai’s chuckle is practically weightless, though. “Natsume-sensei, there is always someone who isn’t what they say they are. This world is full of liars.”

Chuuya’s shoulders shrink back yet again. Every word of this might as well be a glowing neon sign with an arrow that is pointing straight at

his head. He is the chameleon. He is the dirty tree with leaves.

“Third motif drawn,” Natsume’s deep voice demands attention, even from his spiraling thoughts. “Two altars are raised. One for the martyr. One for the pariah. Crows…” She pauses and her graceful posture stiffens for the first time today. “Crows circle ahead.”

Dazai chooses that moment to put his restless brain on pause. His tone is soft when he speaks, but it has a biting edge to it. “What does that mean, sensei?”

“It means that there will be once again a split,” she answers, holding his demanding gaze, “and there will be death.”

“Death,” Dazai echoes melodically, rolling the word around his tongue like he is trying to get a taste of it. “My oldest friend.”

Natsume withdraws her hands out of his clutch. That raw flash of worry is no longer there, but she doesn’t look all too pleased to hear him joke about it either. “Something is brewing, Osamu-kun. I trust that you know what you are doing in Yokohama.”

“I have managed to know it for the last two years, haven’t I?”

Her confirmation comes not in form of a nod or a word, but a simple breath. Then the same eyes turn to Chuuya. “Do you want to cast a question as well?”

Well, he has been hoping for a magical answer for the last week, hasn’t he? A better chance than this won’t come along.

He slides his hands over the table but before Natsume grabs them, she shoots Dazai a meaningful look that says as much a kick in the butt.

“Rude,” Dazai comments despite already getting to his feet – still hand-cuffed. “So everyone gets to hear my secrets, but I can’t hear Chuuya’s. Blatant favoritism.” Chuuya wants to offer to help him out of them, but is too late, Dazai is already gone.

“You didn’t have to,” Chuuya says as her fingers wrap around his, “but thanks.”

“Most people want to have private readings. Osamu simply likes spectacles and the attention of people that are important to him.”

A small noise nearly slips out of his throat, but Natsume squeezes his

hands as if to tell him to focus. “Cast your question, lad.”

“Silently?”

“Whichever way you prefer. Be intentional, though. One question. Not a thousand tiny ones.”

Chuuya nods, sucks in a deep breath, and lets it out again, channeling all his focus onto one question only:

What decision is best for my people?

For several dragged-out heartbeats, nothing happens. Then Natsu’s clutch grows tight. “First motif drawn. Two scorpions prey on one another. One sheds blood. One bleeds sorrow.”

“A fight?” He can try to wrangle some kind of meaning out of it if he tries, but he would rather let the actual seer out of the two of them contextualize the gibberish to him.

“A fight. A conflict. A betrayal. It could stand for any of these. Blood could mean death, but it could also signify a great injury. However, only one party wins – whether the victory is worth it remains unclear for now.”

Chuuya swallows. Just like she said, there could be a lot of different explanations, but to be given such a similar foretelling as Dazai would be an odd coincidence. His question was about the decision he has to make, after all. A decision that is best for his people, and a conflict that ends in blood.

“Second motif drawn,” Natsume resumes. “A flower wilts in darkness and in light. Its roots cast pitch-black poison into the earth. The blossoms turn rotten. This stands for misfortune.”

This one, Chuuya doesn’t need an explanation for. A flower wilting can only have so many meanings, though the imagery brings forth flashes of memories. Of Dazai telling him he is a flower that strives in the darkness. Of Dazai giving him a pin with a floral pattern.

“Third motif drawn. Two flames rejoin and set themselves ablaze. Thorny bushes grow together in an impenetrable thicket.”

Chuuya’s brows furrow. “The first one I get –” At least partly. “But the other one… more misfortune? That what it means?”

“No, child,” he hears her say with a smile in her voice. “It stands for love. Connection. Unification. A powerful but dangerous bond in a hostile environment.”

“Oh.”

“There is another motif. Hush now.”

Four?

“Fourth motif drawn. The tides come during a storm. Ash falls from the sky. The subject breeds chaos.” Well, that sounds promising. “Conflicts and wars all come with tides and ash. Someone will have a part in it. Whether it’s you or someone close to you is up to your actions to decide.”

Chuuya curls his fingers around themselves when Natsume opens her eyes and lets go of him, the silence she is emitting leaving him room to think and ask more questions. But if he is honest, he is not the least bit smarter than he was before.

Betrayal. Failure. Bonding. A conflict.

What about that is supposed to tell him what is best for his people?

“It’s okay to be confused,” she says. “These bits and pieces take a while to settle. Most of the time, people only realize the true meaning of them once they have already happened.”

“No offense, but what’s the damn point then?”

She smiles. “The more often you do this, the more experienced you will grow in handling this type of information. Though sometimes the point lies not at all in knowing what the future might hold, but that there is a future at all.”

He lets out a breath, eyes fixating on his fingers flexing and unflexing in uncertainty. “Is everyone’s future always so dark? Death, betrayals, conflicts?”

“No. Some people run away from that. Others,” she does not have to say his name to reveal who she means, “run towards wars without even flinching.”

“You’re saying I chose this life?”

“I’m saying you don’t know anything else. How could you? You’re still

a child."

The scowl Chuuya summons ends up as a half-assed frown. "I'm twenty years old. That's hardly a child."

"Twenty years is nothing." Her words aren't condescending though, just sad, bordering on pitying. "And there is nothing wrong with being a child."

It sounds a lot like the speech that she gave Dazai, too, which reminds him that the man is currently somewhere scouring the dark hallways like a distant, lonely planet in a galaxy far away waiting to be discovered. That image should be funny. Instead, Chuuya's heart just throbs because his feet ache to fling himself into space and use his ability to bring him back to earth.

And because he can't.

Not without changing the order of the universe and razing down everything that he knows.

"Thank you, Natsume-sensei," he says and gives her a deep bow. "For letting me join and for giving me… this."

She returns the gesture with a knowing smile. "Good luck, Nakahara-kun."

Good luck.

Outside, his eyes search for a lone shadow waiting in the corner somewhere but only find walls and corners. Chuuya doesn't really need to piss but he goes to the bathroom anyway and bites his cheek when he passes the gardens where he sees Dazai standing with his back to the residence, head tilted like he is looking at the sky.

It's June but the morning air bites at his skin when he slides the door shut behind him and wraps his arms around himself.

"Are you trying to get sick?"

Dazai holds off on replying for so long that Chuuya starts suspecting he either didn't hear him, or that he is simply ignoring him, the more likely possibility. Then his shoulders sag ever so slightly, and he looks over his shoulder. "Would you take care of me if I was?"

Chuuya grunts out a noise under his breath. "I'd rather not, so come

back inside. It's freezing."

"All right, all right."

His eyes narrow when Dazai totters over, wearing a suspicious lack of metal around his wrists. "How did you get out of the handcuffs?"

"I have my ways ~"

Chuuya considers respecting the deep silence that has draped itself over the entire residence but finds that he can't. "So you can nullify abilities, huh?"

"Seems an awful lot like it," Dazai murmurs next to him with the tone of someone talking about their grocery list.

"How does it feel?"

That earns him a glance and a moment of hesitation.

"It feels like nothing."

Chuuya can't imagine what that's like. He knows a thing or two about too much: too much hunger, thirst, pain, hatred, anger, but never… nothing. Never too little.

They have arrived in front of the room he shares with Yuan when Dazai suddenly says, "Give me your hand."

Chuuya swallows but does, lifting his arm and offering it to him.

"Now use your ability."

A red glow appears around his skin as he makes himself lighter – just a tiny bit, nothing too big to actually change anything but simply to use for the tainted sorrow.

A moment later, Dazai's fingers touch his skin. His thumb is a gentle press against the place where the heartlines run over his palm, his fingertips curving around the arch that connects his hand to his wrist.

It's cold, at first – cold because Chuuya is so used to the heat pumping through his veins that the absence of it is jarring. The handcuffs are different. They sever a link between him and his ability, but they never annihilate the scalding red. Not like this.

But after the cold comes relief.

Because Dazai does not only nullify Chuuya's ability. He nullifies the never-resting god inside him too. The insatiable hunger for carnage. The bloodlust. It's like a single moment of clarity in a world that is smattered with kaleidoscopic colors. Like he can close his eyes, shut his ears and actually be alone.

It doesn't feel like nothing.

It feels like reaching the surface of a bottomless ocean.

Chuuya's fingers twist around Dazai, trapping him before he can ever let go. "Feels good."

"For the tainted sorrow…" Dazai's eyes slide from their joined hands to his face. "… is very warm."

"I know." It's not his ability though. That's something else. "Too warm sometimes."

Shaking his head, Dazai gently pulls at his fingers, not trying to get out of his grasp but playing with him. "No. Just warm enough."

The thing about pain that you carry within you every day is that you only start noticing it once you get a taste of what a life without it is like. So when Dazai's hand eventually slips away, Chuuya's breastbone aches like someone took a swing at him.

It doesn't make sense. It makes no sense for Dazai to bring so much doom yet at the same time take away his pain.

Just makes no sense.

There is nothing left to say or do. No reason to stand here and feel sick with longing for skin that is barely a foot length away. No need to linger.

Which is why Dazai finally murmurs, "sleep tight, Chuuya."

But there is also no need for him to lift his hand and stroke his thumb over his cheekbone, granting him one single second of that sweet relief before taking it away again.

Dazai does it anyway.

When Chuuya crawls back into the sheets a few minutes later, his eyes burn. He knows that he has to take the chance and leave the port mafia. He has to. He just doesn't want to.

The body on the futon next to his turns then.

“Sorry,” he murmurs, his heart still pounding the beat of a pining song. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Sighing, he rests his head against the pillow. A moment later Yuan reaches out a hand between them to clutch at his hand.

“Chuuya?”

“Yeah?”

“Don’t leave us,” she whispers. “I know you like him. I know everything is a little bit messy. But please stay. Don’t leave.”

Chuuya stares at where she is grasping him, the same way he was just grasping Dazai. Then he closes his fingers around her hand and squeezes back. “I won’t.”

He has to.

Chapter End Notes

Next up we have:
- a disguise
- an answer
- a performance

Chapter 17: Hostile Environment

Chapter Notes

Thank you to Emily light of my life for beta-in this thing <3

Warnings: human trafficking, recreational drug use, cross-dressing

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next morning starts with a city map of Osaka.

“These,” Dazai hovers his index finger over several spots, “are the city’s hotbeds for abductions, brothels, trafficking rings and drug dens. Kage has been spotted here and here in the last three days, but make no mistake, he’s the ringleader, not a grunt or a recruiter, so chances are low that his people will operate from there.”

Chuuya stops chewing on his bottom lip in favor of asking, “Is there any place at all that his organization has been directly linked to?”

“*The Lotus Fire* , an exclusive social club located here.” This time, Dazai points at a district in the outskirts of Osaka, which might be odd for a civilian club, but ordinary if it’s a front for underworld activities. “It’s how Kage meets with possible affiliates for business, though he never makes an appearance himself, only ever sending his henchmen. Otherwise, a woman has been spotted in the Nishinari slums according to Natsume-sensei’s sources, telling a few homeless girls about a job at a beauty salon in the neighboring city.”

“That’s the same thing they did back then too,” Yuan says with a stony look on her face.

More often than not, organizations like that barely even have to get their own hands dirty. They send the same people that were once lured into their circles to lure in others by promising them money, more autonomy, or simply by threatening them with even worse things than they have already experienced. Soon enough, they not only have people to exploit, but people recruiting even more subjects for them. An entire ring led by a handful of jackals in power.

“The last time we only got a hold of their base because they made the mistake of trying to do business in our territory.” Shirase directs his impatient frown at Chuuya, but his eyes flicker to the man next to him, if only for a fleeting moment. “What are we supposed to do?

Search the entire town?”

Chuuya glances at Dazai, recognizing the *ten steps ahead of you* expression on his face within seconds. The only surprise is that instead of voicing it, Dazai tilts his head to meet his gaze, ricocheting the question out of his court and into Chuuya’s.

So that is how it is then.

Chuuya takes the lead in this one, huh?

“We don’t look for it,” he replies. “We let them take us to it again.”

“And how are you…” Shirase trails off in the middle of his own sentence, eyes narrowing as confusion clears into something a little more solid. “ *Again.* You mean we should intentionally let them take one of us?”

That is how it went down two years ago. The sheep were already alert when some strange woman kept trying to talk their people into accepting a job that could ‘help them off the streets’. Then, when Makoto, one of their own, didn’t come home or report back for more than two days, that suspicion turned into glowing red alarm bells. Thanks to the bracelets around their wrists which were not only a fashion statement or a symbol of their organization but also a GPS tracker to find each other, they managed to track her down. Makoto ended up landing in the organization’s base. Once they found her, they wiped every last person inside out. Or, at least, they thought they did.

“Play the victim, take them out from the inside,” Yuan murmurs, nodding along to her words. “It’s smart.”

It’s the same plan that Chuuya once proposed to dismantle the port mafia. *Cosmic irony* is what this is.

“It’s the fastest way to take them out.”

Judging by the humorless snort that Luca exhales, he strongly disagrees. “Last time was also a blessing in disguise. How are you planning to recreate that kind of coincidence now? Send Yuan to the slums and hope for someone to traffic her?”

“Come again?” Yuan snaps with an affronted shriek. “Why me?”

“Do you see any other girls here?” Luca gestures around the empty

that's empty aside the five of them. "Clearly, the port mafia doesn't have enough other personnel when it really matters."

Chuuya sneaks another glance in Dazai's direction, having to stifle a laugh when the man looks like he is mentally absent. The louder Yuan and Luca argue, the faster Chuuya's amusement fades though.

"— target all kinds of people, not only girls!"

"I'm not saying that it's only girls, but it's more believable."

"Shut it," Chuuya cuts in. "Just for a moment. Shut up. The more people involved, the more likely it is to get attention. That's why it's only us here. But we don't need more than that anyway."

"Since when does the port mafia shrink away from attention?" Luca questions.

"Where are we right now?" Dazai suddenly asks.

Luca furrows his brows, irritated.

"Come on, that's easy to answer, even for you. Where are we right now?"

"Osaka," Luca growls out.

"And have you ever heard of anyone from Osaka coming to Yokohama and starting trouble? Anyone?"

"What does this have to do with *anything* ?"

"Well, perhaps if you used that brain of yours for even one single second you wouldn't have to ask such stupid questions." Dazai's lips tug up but it's not a smile that he summons. It's pure disdain. "You've never heard of any disputes with clans from Osaka because there are territories that make sure of that. If you want to start a war with the mafia that rules over this city and that obviously does not give a shit about its habitants being trafficked, then go ahead. But you will fight this war alone."

Luca's mouth clamps shut into a thin, angry line.

Chuuya uses the temporary silence to tap his fingers against the map and take a breath. "Yuan won't have to do it. I'll be the bait."

He doesn't feel the familiar weight of Dazai's eye on him, which

means Dazai already figured he would be proposing this idea as well.

“It will be safer to have someone with an ability on the inside, and…” Chuuya tugs at a loose strand of his ponytail. “I think the hair will work to my advantage.”

To him, his hair has never been a sign of anything but a way of living. Why the length of it is seen as something more feminine still escapes him to this very day, but it doesn’t change the fact that others mistake it for something else all the time.

“Clothes and make-up can take care of the rest, right?”

“Are you sure?” Yuan asks.

“I’m not going to risk anyone else’s life when I can do it myself.”

“You can’t be serious,” Luca mutters.

“Do you have a better suggestion?” Dazai chirps out before anyone else can, his voice as soft as a viper’s hiss.

Luca’s scowl deepens but he directs it at the map. “They’re not amateurs who will fall for cheap tricks like that. A dress-up will hardly change that.”

“You really underestimate the power of make-up,” Yuan says.

“Yeah, whatever you say.”

Chuuya clears his throat before glancing at Dazai. “That club you mentioned. Can you get us in?”

“Sure I can.”

“Do you think some of the girls he has kidnapped will be there?”

“I know for a fact that there will be,” Dazai says. “Kage has built himself a reputation to have an army of beautiful girls by his side at all times. Same goes for his henchmen, of course.”

Well, then it’s obvious that they have to do.

Chuuya looks into the round before saying, “I will let one of his henchmen take me to Kage. Then I’ll snap his neck and the neck of everyone else that works for him.”

***

Later that day, after a trip to the city to put out their feelers for any rumors and whispers and a little shopping detour with Yuan, Chuuya ends up sitting in front of a vanity mirror, watching as various make-up products transform the sharp edges of his face into soft, full curves, and add a peach-colored blush infused with glitter to his skin.

Yet again, it reminds him of the day he married Dazai.

Chuuya was sitting in a chair just like this one, Yuan behind him just like now, and his heartbeat just as unsteady as the pulse in his chest.

It makes sense in a way, to finish this chapter the same way he started it.

After all, this is the last mission in the port mafia. As soon as they are back in Yokohama, Chuuya will give Dazai his answer. The sheep will leave, and everything will return to the way it once was. No more mind games. No more deals with the devil. No more constant fighting with his friends.

The choice comes with a surprising side-effect: an odd tranquility that lets Chuuya shrug off any and all obstacles currently in his way, be it Luca's constant nagging or having to act shy and coy in front of a bunch of pigs tonight, to focus on the task that matters. Because he knows it will be the last time he will have to put it up with it anyway.

It's freeing not to constantly carry around guilt and fear on his shoulders. Chuuya wonders if that is how Dazai feels all the time. If that is what one has to lose to be able to lead an organization like the port mafia.

"Do you want lipstick?" Yuan wants to know, tilting her head in the mirror.

Chuuya shrugs. "You decide."

" *You* have to wear it."

"Fine."

"As in yes, you want lipstick?"

"Something subtle."

"Obviously." Her eyes narrow as she contemplates several kinds of

colors before she settles on one with a hum and tilts Chuuya's head up to look at her. "Thank you, by the way. For doing this."

He can't answer without disturbing her work, so he waits until she's done before speaking. "I was going to suggest myself to be the bait from the very start, but, you know, Luca beat me to it."

"As he always does," she mutters. "I thought that he'd at least try to work with us on this, but he is literally opposing you on every step of the way. It can't go on like this."

"It won't for long anymore."

"Are you sure? Because I'm not."

"I promise," Chuuya says, the air of breeziness latching onto his tone. *This will all end very soon, so that even Luca will have no choice but let go of his anger.*

"All right." After giving him another once-over Yuan finally claps her hand together and smiles proudly. "The make-up's all done. You're a hot piece of ass, Chuuya."

He snorts under his breath as he looks at the person staring back at him in the reflection. Same as the lipstick, the rest of the make-up is subtle but more than enough to make him appear somewhat softer around the edges, his lashes coated with ink-black mascara that makes his eyes stand out, and his cheekbones rounder, dusted with some kind of powder to define facial shapes.

Overall, it's still Chuuya, whether there is a sparkle of glitter on the tip of his nose or not, but to everyone else, to Kage's men, he will be something else instead. Something to be stolen and kept. And something that will end up razing the entire damn ring to the ground. This time, for real.

Yuan drives her fingers through his hair, falling over his back and almost down to his hips. "Now we just need to do something with this. What do you think about waves? Curls will be too much, and I'm afraid you'll turn into Rapunzel if we straighten it out."

"Sure," Chuuya lets his head fall back a bit, blinking up at the ceiling, "waves sound good." The thing that his choice can't help him with is the never-ending restless energy pumping through his blood, making sitting on a chair for more than an hour feel like ten. Or twenty. His only reprieve is knowing that he will get to be active and use his

ability later tonight. And, oh, he will.

“Okay. Let me just see if I can find a curling iron somewhere. I’ll be right back.”

Humming, Chuuya closes his eyes. Perhaps if he pretends to be a pebble, he can stay still for a few minutes longer.

It’s quiet, only the occasional background sounds of the wind and Natsume-sensei’s staff moving somewhere in the house. After a few minutes, Chuuya notices something shift. Not because of any footsteps. Not because he sees something with his eyes closed. But because of a minute shift in the air, like lightning is about to strike him.

Chuuya blinks one eyelid open and is not surprised to find Dazai leaning against the doorway, arms folded over his chest and looking at him without bothering to announce his presence. Fucking creep.

“What are you staring at?” he grumbles, already turning his face away.

“You,” Dazai says shamelessly before pushing away from the threshold and coming up behind him. He looks ridiculously tall in comparison with Chuuya seated in a chair. Then again, Dazai always looks ridiculously tall next to him. “I got us two spots on the guest list tonight.”

It’s a solo mission but Dazai and the sheep will be in the club as well the entire time. Speaking of, Chuuya catches his gaze in the mirror. “You’re sure the sheep will be able to get inside as the staff?”

They decided that they should go undercover as waiters and hostesses so that they can locate as many of Kage’s people as possible and slip GPS trackers on them since an organization like that is guaranteed to have more than one base.

“Natsume-sensei pulled a few strings to make it possible, so yes.” Dazai nods. “100% sure.”

“Good.” Chuuya mirrors the nod. “That’s good.”

Dazai’s gaze travels down, locking on his hair for some reason. He even tugs at a strand, though it’s far too gentle for Chuuya to feel it. “Why did you decide to grow it out?”

“Huh?”

“Your hair.”

“It’s always been long,” Chuuya replies with a curious frown.

Dazai pauses for a heartbeat, then he offers Chuuya a smug grin. “You mean to tell me you were born with your hair this long already?”

“No, it’s just…” It’s an understandable joke, he knows that. No one comes into the world with a ponytail. But Chuuya doesn’t even know whether he was born at all -- whether someone used to carry him in their womb for nine months, or whether it was something else that brought him here fourteen years ago. It goes to show that even Dazai can’t know everything.

“It’s been like this for as long as I can remember,” Chuuya finishes after a small pause. “That’s what I mean.”

“Ah.” Dazai hums and tugs at another strand, thicker this time. “So you’re just used to it like this that you can’t imagine it in any other way.”

“Not really. It’s about winning.”

Dazai lifts his eyes to look at him in the mirror.

Chuuya sighs. “I heard this thing once, as a kid. That, uh, warriors only cut their hair when they lost a battle.” Already able to make out the stupid look he will get in return, Chuuya crosses his arms and pointedly stares at the corner of the ceiling. “I do the same.”

There is a long pause before Dazai asks, “and how many times have you cut it since you heard this thing?”

“Three… four times? Hard to say. I haven’t cut it since I turned eleven.”

“You haven’t lost in nine years?”

“Yes.”

Everything on Dazai’s face looks like it’s grinning except for his mouth, deliberately pulled into a neat line. “Not a single battle?”

“That is what I said, yeah.”

“What about the dragonhead conflict? Everyone in Yokohama lost something in those three months.”

“Not us. All of the sheep survived that mess.”

Dazai’s finger curls around his hair so naturally that he probably doesn’t even notice he is doing it. It’s not annoying enough to stop him. “How about that time a year ago when you tried to raid one of our warehouses and failed to do so?”

“Tch.” Chuuya rolls his eyes. “We didn’t win, but we didn’t lose either. You never even retaliated.” A fact that in hindsight stands out like a lone tree on a hill in hindsight. His brows draw together. “Why didn’t you?”

“For the same reason we are operating as ghosts here in Osaka. Killing a few troublemakers wasn’t worth the war you would have brought on us in return.”

“Really?” he asks before he can stop himself. No matter how confident Chuuya is in his own skills, the picture Dazai paints of him makes Chuuya out to be as powerful as an organization with possibly hundreds of ability users. That’s putting a lot of faith in him, especially out of the mouth of someone like Dazai.

“You’re the strongest person in Yokohama, possibly in the entire country even.” Despite the big words Dazai uses, his tone is calm and smooth. Every syllable falls so easily off his lips that it sounds like a given fact instead of a gross exaggeration. “Only madmen or fools would try to fight a firestorm with sticks and stones.” He keeps playing with Chuuya’s hair, brushing his fingers through the strands before he offers him a lopsided grin. “And I might be slightly insane, but I am not a fool.”

Maybe the reason behind all of this isn’t as complicated as Chuuya thinks it is. Not for profit, or a deep hidden secret, or all the silly things Dazai told him. Maybe it’s the simple fact that Dazai thinks having Chuuya on his side is better than having him as an enemy.

For some reason, it makes his stomach sink in disappointment.

Not that it even matters anymore.

“Dazai…”

That one eye finds him.

“Don’t become a fool any time soon. Stay smart.”

To anyone else, it would be an odd string of words to give to someone.

To Dazai, it’s a confession, a plea, and an answer all at the same time.

That flash of wavering surprise on his face says as much, his mouth parting only for nothing to come out before he eventually shrinks his expression into a nod. Dazai lets Chuuya’s hair slide between his fingers one last time, then lets it go. “Chuuya has made a decision then.”

“Are you really surprised?”

“No,” Dazai says. “I suppose not.”

The gentle tone in his voice, the wistful shadow clinging to his features, the bittersweet half-smile – they all cut through Chuuya’s chest like a thousand tiny papercuts, stealing the breath out of his lungs.

“Thank fuck, I finally found a – oh.” Yuan slows down when she barges into the room and sees Dazai. “Are you here to help with Chuuya’s hair?” she asks, not exactly hostile but not exactly friendly either.

“*You’re* here to do Chuuya’s hair,” Dazai replies, his tone dismissive and derisive. “I’m here to talk to my husband, king of the sheep, the main subject of this mission, Nakahara Chuuya.”

Chuuya catches Yuan rolling her eyes as she plugs the curling iron into an outlet. “A *no* would have been enough. Thanks.”

“Think you can be ready to leave in an hour?” Dazai wants to know, ignoring her comment.

“Well, Chuuya does have an obscene amount of hair,” Yuan makes a face as she studies what she has to work with before she lifts her gaze and notices that Dazai’s sentence only had a question mark at the end of it for show. “Yes. One hour is fine.”

“Good. Natsume-sensei already fixed us up with the staff clothing for you. You will find it in your rooms.” Dazai throws one last sparing glance their way, then vanishes in the doorway.

Chuuya’s chest sags a little.

Behind him, Yuan looks up. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he says.

“Tell me. Maybe I can help.”

“Nothing’s wrong.”

“Fine. Don’t tell me then.” For the next few minutes, only the smell of mechanical heat penetrates the air as Yuan curls one lock after another and Chuuya focuses on the things that are ahead only, not behind them. “Are you nervous?”

“Not really.”

“I am.”

Chuuya swallows. “You’ll be fine.” Dazai admitted that losing the sheep isn’t worth making Chuuya lose it, so he will protect them while he is busy.

“Not about me. We’ve got the easy job, dumbass.”

Oh.

“I’ll be fine, too,” he says.

He will be.

By far the hardest part of tonight is the clothing he has to wear. It takes him nearly twenty minutes to learn how to walk in shoes with heels without breaking his legs in the process (and without relying on his ability.) Yuan also insisted a bra would make it look like he had at least a bit of a chest, so Chuuya agreed to it – something he starts regretting when he realizes that the stupid thing is anything but cozy, uncomfortably digging into his back instead.

“You have to wear this every day?!”

Yuan responds with a flat stare. “Yup.”

“That’s awful.” Spinning around, Chuuya grabs the dress from the hangar. “I don’t know how you do it.”

“Holy shit, what is *that* ?”

Eyes wide, he looks over his shoulder. “Huh?”

“That!” Yuan stabs her finger at his back. “Since when do you have that?!”

The tattoo.

“Oh, that. I don’t know. Dazai gave it to me a while ago.”

“And you somehow never cared to mention it?”

“What’s there to mention? We joined the port mafia and I got an initiation tattoo.”

“Well, you could have said exactly that,” Yuan complains behind him. “I swear to god, Chuuya, if you start having an affair with Dazai and deem it as not worth mentioning, I’ll actually strangle you.”

Chuuya’s muscles stiffen. Only for one single second, but apparently, it’s enough because he can feel Yuan’s eyes drill holes into his spine.

“Chuuya…”

“How many times do you want me to say it? Not having an affair.”

“Then what was that?!”

“Nothing.”

“Chuuya.”

The dress he slips on drowns him in glitter and sparkles, but even that isn’t enough to hide his expression. He’s always been such an awful liar. “Not an affair,” he repeats quietly. “Just one kiss.”

Yuan gasps. Then she smacks his shoulder. “Chuuya!”

“Stop hitting me! I told you! What more do you want?”

“I want you to tell me things instead of me having to drag them out of you! And a kiss? Really?!”

Chuuya grunts in reply.

“A kiss?!”

“Yeah.”

“Sex I get, but a kiss, Chuuya? A KISS?”

“People kiss too when they have sex. What’s your point?”

“Did you have sex?”

“No.”

“Well, that’s my point! You have sex to have sex, but a kiss…”

“It just happened, okay? Drop it already.”

“A kiss,” Yuan parrots for the nth time.

“Let’s just fucking go,” Chuuya snaps.

Dazai and the sheep are waiting for them in the genkan, dressed up and ready to go. So is Chuuya, though he finds himself coming to a halt when all three of them gawk at him like they have never seen someone wear a damn dress before.

“What?” he snaps with his hands on his hips. This isn’t something he planned to overthink, so it would be nice if everyone else focused on the actual task at hand instead of the trivialities that come with it.

“Chuuya,” Shirase says, “you look so…”

He waits, raising his brows.

“So…”

“I think Shirase’s brain broke,” Yuan comments dryly.

“I’m just… that’s all make-up?!”

“Let’s just hope it works,” Luca mutters, already turning around.

“It will,” Chuuya says because if it looks convincing now, it will be more than enough in a club with bad lighting, booze, and drugs. As his friends make their way out of the door and to the cars waiting for them outside, Chuuya can’t help but glance at Dazai, who has his eyes locked on him too, but in one way or another, that’s the case most of the time. Chuuya doubts something as mundane as a dress and some make-up are enough to break through those impenetrable steel walls of his.

No words fall between them, and they are on a schedule here, so Chuuya intends to follow the sheep outside. A hand stops him.

“Not so fast,” Dazai drawls and rolls his long fingers to reveal a tiny tracking device between them. “Open your mouth for me, Chuuya.”

He has to take a deep breath to drown out the echo of double-meanings and only listen to what was actually said which is nothing dirty at all, merely a basic instruction to guarantee the success of tonight’s plan. Meeting Dazai’s steady gaze, he parts his lips and sticks out his tongue ever so slightly. Holding eye contact while he presses the tracking device against Chuuya’s tongue and then softly seizes his chin to make him swallow it down is a bad, bad idea, one that makes Chuuya’s abs clench with tension. Yet looking away first from a man like this would mean pulling in his horns, and Chuuya is a lot of things, not all of them good, but he is no coward. There is a reason why they called themselves *the sheep*.

Chuuya feels the device go down his throat, but what should be the end of this awful tension only gets dragged out when Dazai takes away his hand and praises him softly. “Good boy.”

“Shut up, Dazai.” The intended hiss trembles apart into a whisper. “You have to shut the hell up.”

That gleam that promises more dirty double-meaning wrapped up in innocent words, more searing eye contact, and more teasing is *there* , guttering like a burning flame in Dazai’s eye, coaxing out droplets of sweat from Chuuya. Then it flickers out – *Dazai* puts it out. He still smiles, still looks at Chuuya, still nudges his head towards the car, but the heat is replaced by a fading warmth.

Chuuya takes what he asked for and finally tears his eyes away, turning them to his future instead, and his future lies in the faces of his friends that are waiting for him to join them. Not here. And definitely not with Dazai.

The sound of the heels knocking against the ground under his feet is steadier than the beat inside his chest.

Soon they are all sitting inside a limousine that Natsume-sensei provided for them and going over the details of the plan again.

“You will have to put tracking devices on Kage’s people as quickly and as subtly as possible.” Dazai’s gaze is directed at Yuan, Shirase, and Luca, of course. “I don’t care how you do it, just get it done, so that as soon as Chuuya is on the move, you will be ready to leave as well.”

“What if someone catches us?” Shirase asks.

“Then we’re screwed,” Yuan replies.

“If someone catches you, take them out,” Dazai says.

“But quietly,” Chuuya adds in case Shirase takes that as a sign to fire a bullet through someone’s skull in the middle of a club.

Dazai nods next to him. “Very quietly. We’re undercover because the plan depends on a surprise attack. The only people who will know who hit them will be the same people that will be dead very soon. Speaking of…”

Noticing his gaze, Chuuya exhales and nods. “Yes, yes, I know. Can’t use *tainted* too obviously.”

“Yes, that’s what I was going to say,” Dazai agrees. “Make the building collapse if that’s what you feel like but preferably no dents or the mafia here will be able to trace it back to gravity manipulation.”

“Obviously.”

“You know the signal once you are –”

“—finished with Kage or his men, *yes.* Morse code. I know.”

“And the signal inside the club –”

“—is the drink we talked about,” Chuuya finishes once again. “I know. I am ready.”

“Don’t be impatient,” Dazai says in a chiding tone. “It’s better to be safe than sorry.”

“I can be impatient and safe, you know. People are versatile like that.”

“People that aren’t you.”

Chuuya is about to fire off another retort when Shirase’s voice from the back suddenly asks, “what’s our code to meet again?”

His mouth locks. Not because of the question, but because for a moment there, he completely forgot his friends are in the back, able to listen to the entire conversation. A harmless conversation, but still. He forgot.

When they arrive in front of the club, the sheep are the first to climb out and use the service entrance to get inside while Dazai and Chuuya

drive a few rounds around the block first.

“The hardest part won’t be getting Kage’s henchmen to notice you,” Dazai says at some point during the drive, “but the part of getting from them to Kage.”

Chuuya has been staring at the road, but the oddly serious pitch in Dazai’s voice makes his gaze slide towards him. First, at the hands that are tightly wrapped around the steering wheel, then his blank face.

“How it plays out depends on you. Act too weak and frightened and they will smell it like sharks in the ocean. Act too brazenly and they might get suspicious.”

“I know.”

But Dazai shakes his head. “It’s not just a fight, Chuuya. You might cross some lines today that you never should have to cross, and I don’t want you going into it blind.”

“I know," Chuuya repeats just as honestly. “I was aware of this when I suggested myself as bait and I’m still aware of it. I know that this isn’t just as simple as giving someone a beating. I .”

Aware that he might have to let people touch places he doesn’t want to be touched. Aware that the mask he has to put on today will have to be perfect or else either the mission or Chuuya himself might get torn apart in the process. Aware that he will have to swallow pride, dignity, and his fucking soul, but that he will spare a few hundred other people the same kind of pain.

Chuuya has *always* been aware of what playing with sharks and jackals meant, and he knew he would be willing to withstand it for his friends anyway the moment he agreed to an arranged marriage with the boss of the port mafia. Dazai might have turned out more mystery than jackal, but in the end, this is no different from that night Chuuya waited half-naked in the bedroom for him, ready to do whatever it takes.

Dazai is silent for a moment. Then he says, “don’t let them take too much. If it ends in a war, then it ends in a war. Some things are not worth sacrificing.”

Chuuya casts another glance at him, wondering whether once upon a time Dazai sacrificed a little bit too much of himself for something

else as well. In the end, it doesn't matter. Not really. They are two different people with two different stakes in this. Chuuya knows how much he can give, and he is ready to do so.

"And some things are," he replies before nudging his head towards the entrance of *The Lotus Fire.* "Let's go."

The club that people see from the outside is only a front for the one in the basement of the building that requires a password and a thorough search by the bouncers. Because it's exclusive to the upper crust at the top of the ladder, Chuuya has to get inside with Dazai who apparently has an entire persona that's actually known to the outside world, but not associated with the port mafia, created just for cases like that.

As soon as they are inside though, they separate.

Chuuya's own persona is supposed to be a bit lonely and helpless, easy to spirit away.

The basement is drowning in dim blue-violet lights, a sickly-sweet, sticky fog of haze hanging in the air so that even though the number of people here is lower than upstairs, it's still no easier to breathe as slow, hypnotizing soft-pop plays over the speakers. Chuuya's first destination is the bar, but he lets his eyes take everything else in on the way there. The dance floor isn't crowded but those who are on it look like they are so drugged into oblivion that they probably aren't able to think their way out of a paper bag. The people in the lounges seem to be enjoying the show though, and –

There.

Chuuya instantly recognizes the man in one of the lounges. That's Kage's henchman. Shibuya Katashi. Dazai showed him pictures of him earlier today.

His eyes don't linger, quickly sliding towards the bar instead as he finds himself a free spot and waits for the waitress to approach him. Behind her, he catches a flash of pink moving through the kitchen. So Yuan is here. Good.

Chuuya orders himself a fruity cocktail and lets it stand next to him as he looks at his phone and pretends to be unobservant. The more careless people think his persona is, the easier. In reality, he thinks of the best way to approach Kage's henchman.

Waltzing up to the lounge is too bold, too risky. Besides, it looks like

there are security guards posted in front of it anyway. He won't get in unless Kage's men want him there. But make-up, dress, and hair aside, Chuuya doubts he's any more attention-grabbing than the other people in the club. More sober and steady on his feet? Yes. But that is about the only visible thing differentiating him from everyone else.

He could also try to get an in with Shibuya's other girls but that bears the risk of taking too much time only to end up with a fucking henchman when Chuuya needs Kage himself. Work his way down from the top of the dirty ladder.

When the bartender slides over his drink, Chuuya orders himself another one.

A glass of water.

Code for…

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Dazai stroll past him and in the direction of the bathrooms. So fast. He has probably been keeping an eye on Chuuya the entire time… which was the plan, of course.

Chuuya sips on his drink for another five minutes so it doesn't look suspicious when he leaves a few bills on the counter and follows the trail of dancing lights to the place he's supposed to meet Dazai in cases like this.

The bathroom is empty when he enters it, the floor so sticky that every step makes a squeaking sound. Chuuya spots a syringe in the corner before he focuses his gaze on the stalls, kicking the only one that's occupied with the heel of his foot.

It swings open a moment later. Inside Dazai is casually leaning against the wall, beckoning him in with a nudge of his head. He looks a little wrong in a place like this, Chuuya thinks. Out of place. Misguided. Dazai belongs in dark, expensive offices with fine carpentry and rich wood. Not here.

The door clicks shut, locking both of them inside in a bathroom stall that's barely wide enough for one. Chuuya has never been claustrophobic before, but he understands now what people must feel when they become painfully aware of how small the space around them is. How hard it gets to push air in and out of the lungs.

He opens his mouth, but Dazai shushes him wordlessly, pulls him closer with a palm on his back and leans down to his ear instead.

“Safety precautions, Chuuya.”

“There isn’t even anyone in here,” he whispers back, having to go up on his tiptoes even with the heels on. “But fine whatever. We have a minor problem.”

“You can’t get to Shibuya without making it too obvious, I know.”

Chuuya draws back to nod – and to breathe.

“I have a plan.”

“I know.” The words spill out with traces of a subdued smile. “That’s why I’m here. So what do we do?”

Dazai meets his gaze, numbers and equations running through his eyes before they flutter shut for a second. “You might not like it.”

“I don’t like a lot of things,” Chuuya whisper-mutters. “Just say it.”

“My persona for the underworld,” Dazai tells him as his fingers lift to start unraveling the gauze around his neck. “Tsushima Shuji. I can use him to get us into that lounge with Shibuya.”

“Okay.” So far that sounds reasonable. “I’m still waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

“Do you trust me?”

Chuuya swallows. Only a fool would answer the question without even knowing what Dazai is planning, but fuck, it’s Dazai. Somehow, he managed to turn himself into a safety net for Chuuya in the last couple of weeks. Somehow, he managed to make Chuuya trust him. Blindly. “Yeah.”

“Okay, then trust me with this,” Dazai says, holding his gaze. “All you have to do is play along.”

His pulse races, but he nods anyway.

Dazai removed the visible gauze on his body before they entered the club, so as far as Chuuya goes it’s the most naked he’s ever seen him. Now he makes a point of driving through his hair to make it appear wild and tousled. Chuuya knows it’s all for the sake of his undercover persona, but It’s still unfair to look this effortlessly good.

Then, however, his attention turns to Chuuya.

“You have to look a little messy,” Dazai murmurs as he brings his fingers to his eyes and smudges the make-up a bit. “A little ruined.”

Chuuya swallows but keeps himself perfectly still, even though every touch makes his skin burn with goosebumps. “You don’t want me to act like I’m your escort or something, do you?”

Dazai winces. “Not per se…”

“Dazai.”

“I told you, you wouldn’t like it.”

He isn’t wrong about that. Chuuya takes another breath and pushes the curl of dread in his stomach away, just like everything else. If it will get him to Kage, then it doesn’t matter whether he plays this role or a shy, helpless little thing that gets roped into a circle she doesn’t want to get roped into. It all amounts to the same thing anyway. All of it a means to an end.

“That’s better,” Dazai comments once he is finished. Chuuya’s relief is short-lived, though, because soon Dazai’s long, cold fingers are wrapping around his hand, stealing warmth and nerves alike. “Let’s go.”

It’s no surprise that their destination is Shibuya’s lounge. What perhaps is a little surprising is that all Dazai has to do is lean in and whisper something into the security guard’s ear to evoke a visible reaction of surprise. He still tells them to wait a moment as he goes to talk to Shibuya, but Chuuya has no doubt that he will come back with an invite.

Dazai acts casual as his arm slides around Chuuya’s waist, even more so when he tilts his torso to him and softly seizes his chin. “Try to relax. Drugged people are not conscious enough to be tense.”

To everyone else, the gesture and the cold expression on his face must look domineering and degrading. Chuuya’s the only one who can see that it’s encouragement disguised as violence.

“I am aware,” he mutters, letting out deep breaths.

“Think of me as just another body you’ll get to kill tonight. That relaxes you, no?”

Chuuya looks at him with a quiet click off his tongue. “For someone

who spent years in an impenetrable castle, you sound awfully eager about dying."

"Maybe I was just waiting for the right way to go out," Dazai banters back.

"And the right way is me? I thought I told you to stay smart."

"That's the 'a little insane' part that I mentioned."

The bodyguard appears before this back-and-forth can go on for another five minutes, motioning them to follow him into the lounge.

Dazai was wrong about one thing. The thought of his death doesn't relax Chuuya. Talking to him does. Just talking to him.

The bodyguard leads them past a thick set of crimson curtains and to the lounge where Shibuya is perched on the couch with a drink in his hand. There is enough space for another two girls to be dancing with each other in the center, though it looks like less of a dance and more of a private performance.

Sparks of anger pulse through Chuuya as Shibuya's face twists into a jeering smirk. "Tsushima Shuji in person. I never thought to see the day that the ghost reveals his actual face."

Taking a seat, Dazai acknowledges him with a nod before beckoning Chuuya closer. Chuuya aims for the spot next to him, but that's not what Dazai has in mind. His arm snakes around Chuuya's waist and pulls him onto his lap instead – one thigh, to be precise, because his legs are spread, but Chuuya still ends up pressed up against all the wrong places, desperately trying to keep his expression as relaxed and pliant as possible.

"The shadows get boring if you spend too much time in them," Dazai drawls. "I like this here much better."

Shibuya looks at Dazai, but his eyes keep darting to Chuuya's body, unmistakably taking him in. "And what exactly are you looking for?"

"A banker."

"Since when? I thought Tsushima was all about independence."

"Independence loses its importance when it makes me miss out on profitable business and untraceable transactions."

“That’s fair… and the right decision. Our business has been thriving. Better to get on it as soon as possible.”

“So?” Dazai asks, his fingers sliding over the curve of Chuuya’s waist down to his thigh.

“So I can see about asking for a meeting with Kage. He is a busy man though, so you might have to wait a good couple of weeks. I’m sure you understand.”

“I do. And I’m a patient man.”

“Cheers to that,” Shibuya says and lifts his glass in salute.

“Why don’t you make me a drink as well?” Dazai asks, his voice right in Chuuya’s ear and his fucking fingers in his blood at this point.

But it’s an act. All of it. And he has to play his own part now if he wants to end this night with Kage’s head on a stake.

Humming under his breath, Chuuya’s left arm slides around Dazai’s neck, his face turns to meet the smoldering expression dancing in his eyes, and his head tilts just enough to expose his neck for Shibuya. “What do you want, boss *?”*

“Something sweet,” is the lazy answer.

The table with the drinks is close enough to be able to lean forward without abandoning his place on Dazai’s lap. He leans forward like that, back arching, and pours him a glass of bourbon. Every movement is surprisingly steady and firm. The feverish adrenaline that was plaguing him has shrunk, overshadowed by the act they are putting on. Chuuya not only knows he has to be convincing, but he *wants* to be good, wants to be perfect in his role.

“How long are you planning to stay in the city?” he hears Shibuya ask.

“Depends.” Dazai accepts his drink before sliding his hand over the inside of Chuuya’s thigh, settling a few centimeters shy above his knee. The only thing separating their bodies is heat. Just heat. “I have a few loose ends to wrap up here and there.”

“I’m sure Kage will be interested in a meeting, but as I said… busy man.”

Dazai lifts one shoulder in a half-shrug. “That’s all right. I have other

ways to entertain myself in the meantime." Just in time, he nudges the rim of his glass against Chuuya's mouth. He doesn't say anything, but Chuuya knows what he wants anyway. Holding his gaze, he parts his lips for him for the second time that night and tips his head. The liquor is bitter. The way Dazai strokes his hair out of his face is sweet enough to make it enjoyable.

Shibuya's eyes follow every second of their public display like a starving beggar as if there aren't two girls dancing *for him* right there. It would be funny how much people want the things they don't have if it wasn't the root of so many problems. Human greed. The only concept in this world that is infinite.

When Shibuya does turn to his girls, it's only to bark out, "Stop the dancing already! Can't you see that no one finds it interesting enough to watch?!"

Chuuya feels his gaze sliding their way, but Dazai inserts himself into his direct field of vision and keeps his focus on him and only him which is good because Chuuya does not need to think about the way those girls are shooting him dirty looks when Shibuya shoos them out of the lounge. It just so happens to painfully remind him how close they are right now, their faces only a breath away, and *that* makes Chuuya want to do stupid things like leaning forward and kissing Dazai again.

The last time they kissed was merely several days ago, and already it feels like a gaping eternity in Chuuya. Already it feels like something is dying inside him every second that he spends just looking.

But this is only part of a play in which Chuuya is supposed to be an object, not the subject that goes after the things he so desperately wants.

"These sluts are good for only one thing nowadays," Shibuya, the bastard, complains across from them. "Where did you find someone like her, huh? She at least understands what she's good for."

"Oh, this little thing?" Dazai cups the back of Chuuya's neck and gently coaxes him into arching it. The stuttered breath that slips out of Chuuya when teeth graze his skin is a product of honesty, not an act. "She's one of a kind, Shibuya-san. Trust me, you won't find anything like her."

Shibuya snorts. "There's always someone like her out there. You just need to tell me where to look."

“It’s not about where. It’s about *how* ,” Dazai tells him mysteriously and his confident smile sharpens when Chuuya slides his arms around his neck, letting a touch of possessiveness show. He has a role to play, that’s right, but he also has to balance the edge between too weak and too powerful. Submissive, yes, but also only obsessed with his – or her – proper master could be the perfect play for what they want to achieve. “And a magician never reveals his secret.” His arm drapes over Chuuya’s waist again, but this time, it pushes him so directly into his lap that Chuuya feels him. *All of him.* Right there.

Dazai gazes at him. “Isn’t that right, darling? I can’t just go around telling everyone what makes you so special.”

It takes an unbelievable amount of self-discipline to focus on what he’s saying instead of the way Chuuya’s ass is pressed against his crotch. Somehow, he manages to nod through the fog in his head.

“How good to know that you’re just as pretentious in real life as the rumors say.”

“I’ll tell you what…” For some reason, Dazai’s voice trails off.

Chuuya wants to look and find out why, but if he is right, then Dazai was about to propose the actual plan and being noisy now of all times could cost them. He doesn’t want to be a dead cat.

“What are you staring at?” Shibuya’s slightly slurred voice snaps. “Clean up the glasses already. And bring us more girls!”

Probably a waiter or a subordinate then.

Chuuya’s muscles are relaxing again when his eyes flicker to the person leaning down to clean empty glasses from the table and he realizes that it’s not just another person.

It’s Luca.

Of course, it’s Luca.

Every single one of his senses snap alert. Chuuya wants to get up, to explain that it’s just part of the plan and not proof that all of Luca’s overbearing suspicions and accusations are right but –

He can’t.

He can’t get up.

The success of the entire mission depends on this, on him staying right here.

He feels Dazai drive a hand over his back, soft and comforting and real compared to everything else. It gives Chuuya the push to look away again, ignoring that Luca is one meter away from him, and sink back against Dazai's body instead.

"I'll tell you what," Dazai says again without any interruptions this time. "As a sign of my gratitude, I'll gift my darling thing to your boss, Shibuya-san."

"A gift, huh?"

Dazai chuckles quietly. "A gift. A foretaste of what it is to work with me. A nudge in the right direction. Call it whatever you like."

Luca disappears from Chuuya's view. And hopefully from the lounge altogether.

"I'm sure boss will appreciate it," Shibuya comments like he's talking about a fucking gift box with donuts inside instead of a person. "Boss also likes them coked-up, though. Less trouble and easier to handle."

Chuuya ignores the nervous flutter in his chest. It's all right.

"Trust me, she's already all the way up to heaven," Dazai drawls.

"Then another hit won't hurt, right?" Shibuya tosses a baggy with powder on the table. "You know how quickly these drugs wear off nowadays."

Dazai reaches for it and takes a good look before cocking his head. "Mind if I take something too?"

"Whatever floats your boat, Tsushima-san."

Chuuya doesn't really understand why Dazai would try the drugs as well when that's taking unnecessary risks to his own life – if safety is what he's worried about – until Dazai leans forward, and Chuuya sees a bit of Dazai's own zip bag sticking out from the inside of his jacket and *oh.*

So that is what he is trying to do.

The thing is: Chuuya can't reach the drugs without Shibuya seeing. The way he is draped over Dazai's lap right now only covers one part

of his body and it's the wrong one.

And there really isn't a lot of time to think.

Only time to act.

Twisting his upper body so he is face to face with Dazai, Chuuya only allows himself one tiny second to stop there and look at Dazai, making sure they are on the right page before he slides his hands down his chest and surges forward to kiss him.

It's only about the mission this time. Really. There is nothing selfish about the way Chuuya brushes their mouths together, bruisingly slow, because there isn't supposed to be anything other than physical attraction here. Only Dazai, an underworld king, taking whatever he wants from the nameless little thing on his lap. Only Chuuya giving him all of it and then some. Only fingers blindly searching for the drugs and pushing them into Dazai's waiting hands once they find them.

Dazai rasps out an amused laugh after they part. He doesn't have to squeeze Chuuya's neck until it tingles with nerves and steal another kiss from him, and Chuuya doesn't have to close his eyes and savor it like a dying breath, but they both do anyway.

Chuuya is past any rational thinking, not when he knows that this is going to be the last time, he will even have the opportunity to make this kind of mistake anyway. It doesn't matter anymore. Kiss or no kiss. Soon there will be no more lines to breach.

"Looks like somebody is a little scared," Dazai says loud enough to drown out the rush in Chuuya's ear – and for Shibuya to hear, of course. "But don't worry, darling. You'll be too high to even realize that your master is someone else now."

Surprisingly enough he doesn't use the table but instead makes Chuuya arch his neck again, spreading some of the fine powder on the gentle slope of his shoulder. It requires Chuuya to stay perfectly still so none of it goes to waste, which is fine at first, and harder when Dazai leans down to snort it off him. It not only tickles but sends a rush so buzzing down his spine that Chuuya feels like he was the one who just took the drugs, especially as Dazai's face remains buried in his neck only to lick whatever particles of cocaine were forgotten.

"And? Satisfied?"

Chuuya feels the shape of Dazai's slow smile ghost over his skin. "Very."

"Think of it as a pre-taste of what it is like to work with *Kage-same*," Shibuya replies. How uncreative.

"A gift for a gift." Dazai bends forward then so he can spread the powder on the table and form two neat, little lines. Chuuya watches him work with one arm around his neck, so used to this position and this performance that he only remembers how strange this actually is when Dazai's face turns to him with a vogueish smirk, and they end up sharing the same air again. "Your turn, darling."

Chuuya leans forward on his own, but Dazai holds his hair for him when he leans down to inhale one line in one go. The chemical burn of cocaine rushes through his system, quickly followed by a pleasant buzz in his chest, making him want to remain sitting on Dazai's lap just for another five minutes before Chuuya has to face the grave and sad reality of their mission, and kill people, and see his friends, and leave Dazai without ever turning back.

There is a second line of coke still waiting though. Chuuya suspects it's not for Dazai but rather means to assure Shibuya that Chuuya is pumped full of drugs that will keep him docile for the next few hours.

Dazai's fingers are already brushing his hair aside before Chuuya can even lean down again, every little breath, gesture, and movement of theirs perfectly in sync without even trying.

The second rush hits him harder. Chuuya's fingers curl in Dazai's shirt to keep himself from tumbling along as the world spins in dizzying circles. Unlike his head, Dazai's body is solid, though. It's grounding and anchoring and Chuuya wants to grab hold of it so they can sink down to the bottom of the ocean together.

"Lovely," Shibuya purrs. "Kage-san will be delighted, I'm sure."

Dazai agrees with a soft exhale. "Make sure it says lovely, will you? I don't want your boss to think I'm sending him used goods."

"Don't you worry about that, Tsushima-san. I'll get to have my fun after the boss is done with her."

You won't ever get to play anything but the dirt in your grave ever again, Chuuya thinks. *Not after tonight.*

Shibuya waves over a few girls and nods at Chuuya. “Take her with you. She’s coming home with us tonight.”

That’s it.

That’s what they wanted.

They almost did it.

Now Chuuya just has to get close enough to Kage and that’s it.

That’s it.

It’s harder to get up from Dazai and leave than he imagined, though. Judging by the way Dazai’s fingers cling to his waist until the last possible moment, he must feel the same. Then the girls are in front of him, and unless Chuuya wants to risk the entire operation, his only option is to force his legs to move and go.

He doesn’t let himself look behind this time either.

Chapter End Notes

> The club scene from this chapter now has a lovely illustration made by Oxxtoblur! Check them out and give them some (a lot of) love <333
>
> Once again, thank you so much for all the support! Next up we have:
> - a mission
> - a confrontation
> - and a breakdown

Chapter 18: A Fork In The Path

Chapter Notes

> Warnings: mentions of drug abuse, mentions of sex trafficking, brief description of torture (towards the ~middle)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dazai's nerves feel set ablaze when he closes the door of the car shut behind him and boots up the laptop. There are too many possible sources and not nearly enough time, let alone relevance, to pick out the right ones, so he shoves the sensation aside and focuses on the blinking red dots on the screen instead.

The most important dot has begun moving ten minutes ago and hasn't stopped ever since. That's good.

Knock. Knock-knock. Knock.

He unlocks the car and lets Yuan climb into the backseat even though her head immediately pops between the two front seats to get a look at the laptop. "He's moving already?!"

"Why else do you think I gave the signal?"

"Then why aren't we moving already?"

Dazai levels a flat look at her. "Do you want to leave behind the other two candidates?"

"Of course not," she mutters with a scowl. "I'm just worried. Those girls in there weren't in good shape."

"How many trackers did you get on them?"

"All of the ones I had. It was pretty easy what with how drugged they all were. Is Chuuya…?"

Knock. Knock. Knock. Knock.

Dazai ignores it.

Knock. Knock. Knock. Knock.

"Aren't you going to open?" Yuan asks.

“It’s the wrong signal.”

“But that’s Shirase out there.”

“And he’s using the wrong signal.”

“Because he’s a little slow.” With a sigh that Dazai feels in his soul, Yuan knocks back and yells, “That’s the wrong knock, Shirase! Use the right one!”

“What???”

“THE RIGHT CODE!!”

“But I – huh?!”

It takes several more agonizing moments until the guy manages to knock correctly. Even then Dazai considers letting him stew in his own stupidity for another minute or so. In the end, their pressing time schedule, and the growing distance between Chuuya’s tracker and their current location convinces him to unlock the car.

“Did it work?” Shirase wants to know as soon as he is inside with sweat, heavy breathing and the stubborn smell of liquor and all; it clings to his clothes like he took a swim in a bottle of wine, or like the bottle took the swim in him, or like the most rational assumption: someone spilled their drink over him.

“Yeah, Chuuya is already on the move,” Yuan thankfully informs him so that Dazai doesn’t have to. “Did you get it done? You had some trackers left when I last saw you.”

“I couldn’t get them all, but most – ouw! What’s your problem?”

“This is important! How do you manage to half-ass even *this* ?”

“I tried! But every time I approached them, everyone looked at me like *I* was the bad guy!”

“So what if they think you’re the bad guy for a night?!”

“Shut up,” Dazai snaps before he has to listen to another reply. “You at least managed to put a few of the devices out there, right?”

“Yes,” Shirase mutters. “Just not all of them. But *a lot.”*

“Then stop yapping about it,” Dazai tells both of them. What a day

without his skull trying to crack apart feels like, he already long forgot, but that doesn't mean he enjoys putting himself into more pain than necessary.

Right on cue, there is another knock at the window.

Although the signal is correct, Dazai takes his sweet time to push the necessary buttons because this is the third one in their little group of misfits and by far his least favorite out of the three. If Yuan is annoying and Shirase a brainless simpleton, then De Luca is the worst: entitled, naïve, patronizing, passive-aggressive, cowardly -- the list goes on. Dazai could flip open a page in the dictionary about negative character traits and that still would not be enough to cover it.

That gloomy expression that Dazai catches in the rear-view mirror is proof enough of that.

"How did it go?"

"Fine. I used every tracker I had."

"Then we can go, right?"

Dazai taps a few things on the laptop, so the map fills with more dots. Most are still here *in the Lotus fire* , but three dots are moving in the same direction Chuuya is. Another two somewhere else.

Yes, they can go.

Even if they don't find out every base Kage's people have here in Osaka, they can still get it out of Kage personally once he is in their hands. That is if Chuuya lets him live long enough, but Dazai is confident that by now they have spent enough time together to think in the same direction.

And Chuuya is smart. He will always put people and logical thinking over revenge.

The engine wakes up with a gentle purr that is far more pleasant than the grating voices of the three lambs in the backseat. As all good things do, it ends too soon.

"You sold him out like an *object."*

Wonderful.

Not only is hearing things Dazai is already aware of boring, but it has

to be the overzealous ex-boyfriend too.

Chuuya's taste in men, just like his taste in friends, has room for improvement. A lot of it.

"You won't even deny it?"

"Luca," Yuan hisses.

"No. I'm sick of ignoring the elephant in the room all the time. What's your deal with Chuuya?!"

Dazai lifts one hand to rub the aching point of tension between his brows. A bullet would be more relieving, but a little massage is all he has right now. "Did the core of the entire mission fly over your head or do you just enjoy asking stupid questions?"

"I don't mean tonight. I mean *everything."*

"Seriously," Shirase mutters under his breath, "are you trying to get us killed or something?"

Cute.

"Based on what I heard you've got me all figured out already, De Luca-kun." Dazai's quiet burst of laughter quickly freezes into a blank stare that points at the road ahead. "So why don't *you* tell me what my deal is with Chuuya?"

"You want his power. It's what all of it is about, right? It's why you decided to ruin the sheep?"

For the tainted sorrow is quite the weapon to yield. The thing lurking underneath even more so. It's true. But that is not what Dazai is after. If he was, he would have ordered the Frenchman into the tower a long time ago.

"That's funny," Dazai clicks his tongue, "coming from you."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that you have been using Chuuya and his power for the last thirteen years, yet the moment he uses it for anything other than you, you suddenly get scared."

"We never used him," Yuan argues this time. "We *all* protect each other. That's what family does."

“And still the only one who ever bleeds for you sheep is Chuuya. Never the other way around.”

“We picked him up off the streets when he had nothing!” Shirase exclaims.

Dazai wants to laugh but all that comes out of his lungs is rotten air. “Congratulations. You must feel really proud of it to still bring that up thirteen years later.”

“If you know Chuuya so well, then you also know that he’s stubborn as hell and there’s not much reasoning to be done with him when he’s convinced he has to protect us.” Dazai sees a flicker of Yuan’s clenched jaw in the rearview mirror. “And it’s also funny coming from *you* when we are here in the car and Chuuya is in some pervert’s base doing all the work! We’re all guilty of the same thing, so you have no right to throw that in our face!”

“I think you’re confusing me with mopey in the back there who insisted on bringing up the topic,” Dazai points out. “All *I* did was point out that none of you are so innocent yourselves.”

The reply is silence. Sweet, divine silence that he gobbles up like cherry wine.

What stings the most is the fact that these so-called friends of Chuuya’s don’t even have a reason to be so scared anymore. He chose them. And he will continue to choose them for the rest of his life. The only thing he hasn’t done is tell them about it, so Dazai is not going to do that either. Let them stew in guilt and fear a little longer. Perhaps they will actually learn a lesson or two while they are at it.

Ten minutes later, Chuuya’s GPS tracker stops moving in the northeast part of Osaka. The location doesn’t ring any bells, though the simple reason becomes clear as soon as they arrive there: it’s just a mansion. Apparently, Kage chose luxury over safety. How stupid.

“Now what?” Yuan asks.

“Now we get into position and wait for Chuuya’s signal.” Dazai opens the glove box to grab the masks waiting there and toss them to the three lambs in the backseat. “Since Chuuya is taking care of the people inside, we are going to take care of the people outside. We’re ghosts, so do not say anything incriminating.” He pauses. “Actually, it’s best if you do not speak at all. Here are guns. If you can’t kill someone, then at least knock them out. Can you do that?”

He gets two nods.

Dazai steals back the gun before mister mopey can take it. “If you can’t put aside your butt-hurt feelings for a minute, then I’m not putting anything into your hands. Especially not a weapon.”

“I’m not –” De Luca’s jaw clenches. “I can do it.”

“Somehow I’m not convinced.”

“Then why am I even here?”

“Because for some reason Chuuya said you would be useful.” Yet all this guy has done today, and yesterday, was mope around and pick fights. “So far, you have only been a pain in everyone’s ass.”

“I want Kage gone as much as everyone else here,” De Luca snaps.

“The question is whether you want him gone more than you want to undermine Chuuya. Because *that’s* what this is about to you.”

“You have *no* idea what you’re talking about.”

“Can we do this later?” Yuan exhales loudly. “After all of this is over?”

“No, we can’t,” Dazai says, never taking his eyes off mopey. “You have to make a choice now, or I’m going to keep you locked in this car.”

“There’s nothing to choose h—”

“Do you want to help Chuuya, or do you want to be right?”

“Stop saying that I –”

“One or the other, De Luca. It’s really not that hard.”

“You’re –”

Dazai lifts the gun in his hand and points it at the place between his eyebrows before his friends even have time to take a breath, one finger disengaging the safety lever, the other releasing a chamber round. The smile that curves around his mouth is full of promises. “Make your choice before I blow your brain out.”

De Luca’s eyes widen.

Shirase scoots away. Dazai feels Yuan bursting with threats but

holding them in while they are in this position.

“Chuuya!” It finally breaks out of him with shuddering, gasping breaths. “I choose Chuuya, okay! I choose him!”

“You should know one thing,” Dazai murmurs, savoring the breathless silence around them. “I dislike people like you, people who have acting like worthless human beings down to an artform, but I dislike lying cowards even more.” His arm drops then, but the smile doesn’t. Not yet. “I hope what you said is true. Because the next time, I will shoot first and give you a choice later.”

He is sure De Luca’s head is brimming with insults and accusations right now, but as long as he forces himself to nod – and he does – and as long as he thinks the next snide remark out of his mouth will earn him a bullet in his skull, Dazai is fine with it.

No one says a word when he opens the door to place a small drone on the ground before shutting it again. The property is fenced-in by thick brick walls, robust ivy clinging to them, and a barrier of thorny rose bushes, not allowing much of a peek inside, which means they have to resort to other means to check out the situation. Dazai opens another window on the laptop. This one shows the thermal imaging from the drone that’s currently several meters above Kage’s property, and thus, every single person in- and outside the mansion.

“That’s a lot of people inside,” Yuan murmurs from the backseat, then points at a specific point on the screen. “Are those alive or –?”

“Focus on your own task,” Dazai says, keeping his eyes on the surrounding property. “There are seven guards, all surveilling different patches of land. We work our way from the main gates to the mansion just like we discussed. Everyone knows what they have to do?” This time the answer is unanimous: a nod. “Good. Then let’s begin.”

Their main ace right now is a party trick that Dazai borrowed from the lovely government branch that exists to keep all known ability users in check: tiny toy balls. Perfect to raise someone’s attention, but infused with so much poison that any body contact whatsoever with them knocks them out for a good day or two.

Luring the guard stationed in front of the main gates close enough to snatch his key gets them their ticket inside. From there on, it’s blending into the shadows and taking out the other men one by one. The (more or less) liable leader inside Dazai hates putting even such a

tiny amount of responsibility into the hands of these little lambs, especially mopey and grumpy, but somehow all three of them manage to get into their positions ten minutes later without having made any noise or lost any body parts.

Dazai still pretends they're not here while he waits in the comforting darkness of the night around them.

The signal comes five minutes later.

One light in the upper window of the mansion starts flickering.

Short, long, short, short, short, long, long, short, short, long, short, long, long flicker.

.-. . .- -.. -.—

Chuuya did it.

Dazai didn't doubt he would, but even everyday phenomena like the tides can break sometimes in the wake of a disaster. Thankfully, not today. Thankfully, not Chuuya.

As a safety precaution, the gun remains up in the air as he slips away from the shadows and inside the light of the mansion. An open entryway with high ceilings, glittering chandeliers and the viscid scent of blood in the air greet him. The curving marble stairway is garnished with a lifeless man at the end of it, his neck broken, and his mouth parted in a breath that he never got to take..

It's an ironic picture: something so ugly surrounded by something so beautiful, and for the first time in a while, Dazai's fingertips itch to find brushes and paint so he can scratch his claws over an empty canvas until that restless energy subsides again.

Behind him, the doors open and close, followed by the invasive sound of clumsy footsteps and heavy breathing. Yuan, at least, is quiet. Shirase, on the other hand –

"Chuuya?!"

Dazai clamps his mouth shut to stifle the urge to empty the rounds of his gun and channels his intent into a single look instead.

"What?" Shirase hisses with wide, puzzled eyes. "He gave us the signal!"

“Quiet,” Yuan whisper-mutters and impatiently tugs at his sleeves.

Dazai doesn’t wait for the third one to join the party before he crosses the entryway and takes a peek at the dining hall inside.

Another painting hand-crafted by Chuuya’s capable hands himself: a fully set long table with fine China dishes, flickering candles, delicacies whose smells still linger in the air, and, most importantly, a bunch of well-dressed men. All of them are dead.

Dazai can’t tell how, which means that Chuuya left no traces of a gravity manipulation ability behind. His work is as always impeccable.

The only sounds in the mansion are the occasional footsteps and the ticking from the clock on the wall, but Dazai’s feet carry him in the direction of the stairs and up, up, up. That, and because the flickering light came from there. Whenever he feels Yuan, Shirase, and now, De Luca attempt to overhaul him with their impatience, he crowds them back with an arm and keeps his position as the lead on the stairs. Only for the sake of *efficiency* of course.

If not for the sole light on the second floor telling Dazai where to go, it would be easy to get lost in the wide hallways and various rooms for all kinds of nonsensical purposes. As it is, the master bedroom is practically impossible to overlook.

It’s just as spacious as everything else with an expensive-looking oak bed, plush carpeting, high windows, and heavy curtains, *and* Chuuya, who is perched on the windowsill, staring down at the unconscious man on the floor with a listless veil over his eyes that could only be described as bored.

Dazai’s mouth perks up without his consent.

Chuuya lifts his gaze and says, “Took you long enough.”

“Well –”

“Thank god.” Yuan is already rushing towards Chuuya before Dazai can finish his sentence. “Are you okay?” she mutters with her arms wrapped around his neck, then pulls away to inspect his face, his arms, probably his soul too. “You look okay. But are you?”

“I’m *fine,”* Chuuya tells her in that *I don’t know even know what fine means* tone of his. “I told you I’d be.”

Since Dazai's opening remark got cut off, he uses his spare time to inspect Kage. His chest is falling and rising, but there is also a thin pencil on it. Dazai has a few ideas why.

"He won't get up with that," Chuuya's approaching voice confirms his theory. "Figured we need him alive."

When Dazai rises back to his feet, Chuuya is next to him, his hands braced on the back of his waist like he wants to slide them into pockets but is unable to because dresses, for some reason, don't come with pockets.

"It's like you read my mind," he says, flashing Chuuya a pleased smile. Dazai's next words come out as he shrugs off his jacket and drapes it over Chuuya's shoulders instead. So he will have his precious pockets back. And not have to be cold. "Right now we only have this and another base thanks to the trackers, but I'm sure this one has many more. We'll just have a little chat with him."

For a moment, Chuuya stiffens, blinking, like he is not sure what to do with the extra layer on. Then he glances down at himself and easily slips his arms inside and – voila, slides his hands into the pockets before his eyes meet Dazai's and he nods.

"There were other girls here," Dazai says. "Did you see them?"

"They're in the other room." Chuuya jerks his chin in the direction. "Uh, they were really terrified and had no idea what was going on, so I just… knocked them out for now. Gently. And those men downstairs? I'm pretty sure they were the mafia." He makes a face. "Only realized it afterwards."

"Mafia members die all the time," Dazai murmurs, tapping Kage's cheek with his foot. "As long as no one finds out who killed them, it will be fine."

"So now what?"

"Now *him.* " Another futile tap. Well, being unconscious is much better than what is awaiting him, so it's not like Dazai doesn't understand. He just doesn't care. *Tap, tap.* "Once we have the bases, that is. Then we go…" He almost says *home* but stops himself in time. "… back to Yokohama."

Suddenly Shirase invades his field of vision with a content grin on his face. Dazai was lucky enough to almost forget that these parasites are

even here in the same room, well-versed in the art of blending them out like white noise, but now he becomes distinctly aware of them again.

“You know what, we’re really good,” he declares and places his hands on his hips. “I don’t know why I was so worried.”

Dazai sees Chuuya’s eyes twitch, though his lips remain pressed shut. Then he gets a clap on the back from Shirase. “You should probably hurry before anyone gets wind of what happened.”

“Why don’t you hurry your useful little feet to the other room and take care of the survivors, huh?” Dazai plasters a false, bright grin on his face. “So you can actually contribute.”

“I’ll help,” Yuan says, already tugging Shirase out of the room before the remark catches up to his little peanut brain.

Rolling up his sleeves and kneeling down to Kage, Dazai sees De Luca linger in the room, infesting the air with all that bitter misery of his. “Chuuya.”

“Not now,” Chuuya mutters, turning to the fly in their trap instead. “I’ve got to finish this.”

Dazai waits until the room is empty aside from them to murmur, “you don’t have to do this, you know. It won’t take long anyway.”

“It’s fine.”

“Are *you* fine?”

Chuuya’s eyes lift and meet his for a fleeting moment before flickering away again. He looks okay, but his fingers curl into a tight fist that clenches and unclenches like he is trying to keep it together. “I just…” His exhale sounds frustrated. “Nothing happened before I put an end to it if that’s what you’re asking. There is just this – this feeling – I don’t know, I can’t explain it.”

“Maybe the drugs?” Dazai guesses. The product he brought along today was intentionally mild, but everyone reacts to it differently. Paired with the adrenaline…

“Maybe.” But Chuuya’s voice does not exactly scream that he is convinced. “I just need something to do right now. Even if it’s… this.”

“Okay. Why don’t you close the door and then see if you can find a lighter somewhere?”

Chuuya makes a face but nods and gets up.

Fire has always been Dazai’s fastest way to get information out of someone.

A minute later Chuuya returns with a lighter that he hands to Dazai before he wallops his foot across Kage’s face. The man’s eyes fly open with a wheezing gasp. Lids fluttering, he makes a miserable attempt at jerking away and fails epically. Chuuya kicks him again.

“Remember me, asshole?”

“You…” Kage doesn’t. Not at first. All he probably sees is a redhead in a dress looming over him, the one that was supposed to be his entertainment for the night but ended up being his downfall. The longer he stares up though, the wider his eyes get as realization trickles in drop by drop – and then in a massive tidal wave that sweeps him up in its current and leaves him struggling to get any oxygen. Chuuya’s foot comes down again and again. His hands never leave the pockets.

“ *It’s you,”* Kage eventually hisses out between bated breaths. *“Nakahara…. You…”*

“That’s right,” Chuuya says dryly. “Me. I thought I’d never have to see your rotten face ever again the last time, but don’t worry. This time I won’t leave until I see you take your last miserable breath.”

Kage must find that incredibly funny what with the way he throws his head back and laughs. Most likely, it’s just the spark of insanity that drives people when they realize they are going to be dead very soon – and when they know they have nothing left to lose anymore. Courage sparked by the inevitable promise of death.

The lighter comes to life with a satisfying click, tearing Kage’s attention from the funny ceiling down to Dazai sitting cross-legged at the end of his bare feet – the shoes and socks were discarded earlier.

“Hey,” he barks out, his laughter coming to a rumbling stop, “what do you think you’re doing?”

“For such a wealthy man, you have very ugly feet,” Dazai murmurs. “The sight of them fills me with disgust that I just can’t stand seeing

them for a second longer."

"What do you – what – " The words stutter and hiccup and finally bleed into a guttural scream as Dazai holds the lighter over his dirty, unhygienic toes until he can smell charred flesh. Wrinkling his nose because of it, he clicks the lighter shut again and lifts his gaze to Kage, thrashing and sobbing and screaming, a disgusting mix of fluids leaking out of him all at once.

"Now then," he says in a voice loud enough to pierce through the man's loud and incoherent wailing. "How about you tell us every single location where you keep the girls that have had to put up with your ugly face?"

"T-That's what this is about?! The fucking hookers?!"

The lighter clicks on again.

"Wait," Kage exclaims. "Just wait a minute! We can talk! You want them?! You want the girls?! I'll give you all of them!"

"I already told you what I want." Dazai waves the lighter dangerously close over the toes that are already burned, giving him a little preview of what it's like to push a wound that already hurts like hell. "All you have to do is sing."

"Fuck you."

Dazai *pushes.*

Kage screams.

From there on out, it's quick.

***

Kage reveals four more locations, two of which match the ones they get from the trackers. A ship transport at the docks, a run-down motel in Osaka's red-light district, an abandoned warehouse, and a farm out in the country. Four more battles. A few dozen more men to take out. And several hours that run so deep into the morning that Chuuya feels like the night might never end again.

It's not the physical exertion that runs him ragged. That he's used to. Chuuya has spent half of his life fighting people and organizations that were trying to hurt his friends, always fighting for *something* . He

is used to it. And he has help. The sheep do what they can but working with Dazai is probably the biggest relief of all, whether he covers Chuuya's back, his blind spot, points something out he didn't see himself, or offers to do the dirty work at the end. It's nice, being able to depend on somebody other than himself – once you get over your pride, that is.

That's fine.

It's something else.

Something that took root when Chuuya got escorted to Kage's mansion along with three other girls and the bastard presented them in front of the group of mafiosi gathered there like they were their living, breathing pieces of fucking dessert. A seed of hatred so bottomless that it was enough to trigger the god's hunger. To sniff it out and set his fangs into it.

I hate it.

"Chuuya?" That's not the voice inside his head. Not the source of that darkness spreading like a virus either. Just Dazai, who glances at him with a flash of concern in his eye. "What's wrong?"

Nothing, Chuuya wants to say but instead a splitting headache seizes his skull. Wincing, he touches his forehead.

I hate it. I hate it. I hate it. I hate it. I hate –

The headache swells. Swells until it feels like there is no place inside his skull anymore. Until it feels like it will shatter into a thousand tiny pieces.

"I need a, uh, second," Chuuya breathes out, stumbling away.

They are somewhere in Osaka's rural area – the last location that they got out of Kage. A shabby, deserted farmhouse in the middle of nowhere with no soul in sight except Kage's men and the slaves they kept. And the men are dead now. It's over. Natsume-sensei will take care of the survivors and decide what to do with them. Chuuya's job is almost done save for cleaning up the mess. There is nothing left to do but get in the car, drive to the airport, fly home, and rub the dirt and grime off his face but –

I hate it.

I hate everything.

It's not Chuuya who thinks that, he knows it's not, and yet that thing who does sits *inside* him, an inseparable part of him whether he likes it or not. It doesn't matter whether it's him or something else. It doesn't matter because in the end, he feels everything *it* does, and there is *so much* of it.

The kind of hunger for destruction that doesn't discriminate between good or bad, innocent, or guilty, necessary, or baseless. It wants to consume everything . Anything at all. Until there is nothing left to take anymore.

And Chuuya *doesn't.* There are people he hates, people that he wants dead, people that deserve to die, but not everyone. Not the entire world. But the thing doesn't care. It senses the spike of hatred rushing through him when his eyes flicker past a lifeless guard on the ground and it tugs at it, pulls it out like a festering string and sets it ablaze with fury and flames.

He shakes his head, refusing to give in to it. *He* is in control. God or no god, *Chuuya* doesn't want to raze the world to ashes like a mindless natural calamity. So he tears his eyes away from the man, turns them to the trees towering like giants in the distance and to the earth under his feet, to anything other than hatred and destruction. But no matter where he looks, all he can see is death.

He sees the lifeless bodies of the girls that they didn't save in time, buried under thin, dirty bed sheets and forgotten by the others because there is too much misery and not enough strength to care about one more death. The blank look on the ones who survived but wished they didn't. He sees the product of being fed drugs to keep them pliant, the need for another rush drowning out the fact that it's over. He sees Kage's tongue licking his lips when they brought Chuuya forward, reeking of lust and greed to rob him empty. He sees Makoto wrapping her arms around herself and refusing to speak for weeks on end. Karma subconsciously lifting his fingers to touch the place where the collar used to be, never finding it but still feeling trapped inside of it anyway. He sees a man groaning in agony because he was crucified and left to rot. He sees a shop owner setting the sheep's camping site on fire so that they would stop scaring off his business.

He sees a little boy covered in tubes and wires and trapped in endless darkness that won't let him out.

He sees a man play with his soul for work. Lock him up for work. And do anything for his work.

You hate it too.

“No,” Chuuya whispers, pressing the balls of his palms over his eyes. He doesn’t. He doesn’t hate it. Not like this. “I *don’t.”*

“Chuuya, talk to me.”

“I don’t.”

“__”

“I don’t, I don’t, I *don’t! Shut up!”*

Cold, steady hands grip his face and make Chuuya’s eyes fly open.

“You’re okay,” Dazai tells him. “I don’t know what’s happening in your head but right now? You’re okay. You’re fine.”

I hate it.

I hate everything.

He’s not.

“It just --” Chuuya’s voice quivers with how hard he’s biting down on his teeth. “It *won’t* shut up.”

I hate it.

I hate it.

I hate it so much.

Everything is so loud. It would be so easy to give in and to make it stop –

“It won’t stop – I can’t make it stop and it’s so *loud –"*

Dazai’s gaze is unyielding. “Just listen to me instead. Listen to my voice.”

He tries. He tries so damn hard but it’s like Dazai is somewhere above the frozen surface and Chuuya underwater, unable to break through the ice and all around him is that voice. Murmuring, whispering,

coaxing him into saying *yes.* Yes, to destruction. To hatred. To vengeance.

“It’s okay.” So far away. “You’re Nakahara Chuuya. Twenty years old. You belong with the sheep and the port mafia. And you’re okay.”

Chuuya squeezes his eyes shut, focusing on getting as close to the source of light as possible.

“And I’m a nullifier,” Dazai whispers. “I’m a nullifier and I’m touching you, so nothing can get to you, you hear me? There are no voices but mine. Just me.”

Just Dazai.

Chuuya sucks in a deep breath. Then another.

He feels Dazai bring his forehead down to his. “You’re okay.”

“I’m okay,” he repeats quietly.

“You’re okay.”

Okay.

Chuuya can’t tell how much time passes. Or whether it passes at all. Standing there and clutching Dazai’s wrists like a lifeline, feeling every point of contact and confirming that there are no voices in his head telling him to burn down the world to ashes might only last for one minute – or thirty. All he knows is that as long as Dazai touches him, the god can’t get to him. As long as Dazai doesn’t let go, nothing will happen.

But the thing about Dazai is that everything he does is fleeting. He never lingers too long. He always ends up leaving just as fast.

Chuuya’s fingers tighten desperately around him when Dazai moves until he realizes that all Dazai is trying to do is let go of his face – and grip his hands instead.

“You need to sleep.”

“It’s got nothing to do with that.” Chuuya *wishes* it did, but it doesn’t.

“You still need to sleep,” Dazai tells him with an uncharacteristically earnest determination in his voice. “You barely did last night and haven’t taken a single break since then.”

“So I do and then what?” Chuuya hisses, meeting his gaze. “What do I do when it comes back and you’re not there to –” His mouth clamps shut.

To –

To talk him down?

Nullify an ability? A singularity? A god?

What then?

What about after Chuuya leaves?

The odd thing about this is that he is talking to Dazai like he knows exactly what he means.

What’s even odder is that Dazai gazes back at him like he does.

Chuuya has wondered before. Whether that is the reason why he is here today. It would make sense. People have tried to tame this god before, and to do that, they had to capture Chuuya first. Maybe all of this has always been about that.

And yet Chuuya is leaving, Dazai is letting go, and nothing about that makes sense.

“Then I won’t let go,” Dazai says like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. Like it’s adding one plus one and the obvious solution is to lace their fingers together and tug him along. “Come on. Our job here is done.”

“But –” Belatedly, Chuuya realizes that they most certainly have not been alone, and that the entire scene played out like a theater performance for his friends to watch. Friends, who are now averting their gazes as Chuuya hurries to keep up with Dazai’s long legs. “What about cleaning up?”

Contrary to popular belief, it’s not the fighting that takes the longest but the part where they have to dispose of the bodies discreetly enough to not leave any trails behind. Especially not ones that would lead someone back to Yokohama. But there are still too many rotting corpses here. So much more work to do.

“Natsume-sensei will take care of it.” Dazai opens the door of the car that the woman in question sent them once Kage finished talking, and

sticks his head inside. “Would you be so kind as to drive us to the airport? Wonderful. Thank you.” When he turns around, he doesn’t immediately climb inside. “Do you want to wait for your friends? Natsume-sensei’s girls can take them in another car.”

Maybe Dazai is right. Chuuya’s eyelids are so heavy that they ache. It’s the only thing he can focus on right now.

That he is exhausted and that there are no voices in his head.

That’s it.

Everything else, he will deal with later. When he’s alone with the sheep. Just the four of them. They will have more than enough of that soon anyway.

“They will be safe, right?” he just wants to know.

“Of course.”

Chuuya nods and that’s all there is to it.

He doesn’t look back when the door closes behind them, doesn’t have the room in his head to worry about what they might or might not think right now. He just wants a moment of peace. A single fucking moment.

And he gets that.

Dazai doesn’t let go. He holds his hand the entire time. Chuuya’s heart is still racing too fast to give in to the sweet temptation of sleep, but even being able to sit back and rest (and feel the occasional graze of Dazai’s thumb rubbing his skin) does wonders.

It takes him several minutes of peaceful silence to ask, “do you know? About… it?”

Dazai doesn’t need him to elaborate what exactly he means by *it,* not when his gaze flickers down, and he nods quietly anyway. “I know some things, yes.”

Meaning he most likely knows much more than Chuuya.

“You could have used that to make me choose to stay,” he murmurs even though it’s more of a loud realization rather than a question that needs a reply. “You didn’t.”

“Manipulating you into staying isn’t much of a choice, no?”

Chuuya lets out a dry snort. “No, I guess it’s not.” After a pause, he casts a glance towards Dazai. “So if I asked to know, would you tell me?” Even if he’s leaving and giving up any rights that could have possibly granted him access to that kind of information.

Dazai meets his gaze, but it’s not the look in his eyes that replies, not the small lift at the corner of his mouth, not even the words, “If you asked me, yes” but it’s the squeeze he gives him. Gentle but firm. Firm but gentle.

“For a price, of course,” he adds because of course he does. “Chuuya knows that I’m not cheap.”

“Of course,” Chuuya mutters with an eye roll. Somehow, he never ends up paying anyway.

He doesn’t ask for it right now.

Deep diving into something as intricate as his upbringing after almost losing control seems overkill, even for someone like Chuuya. Besides, there is this little spark of hope fluttering around in his head that thinks perhaps if he asks for it during their goodbye, Dazai will create a deal to make it not so permanent, after all. Maybe the price will be a day spent together every month. Or week. Maybe the fork in the path doesn’t only have two possible endings. Maybe there is a third one. Maybe Chuuya doesn’t have to let go of this entirely.

Maybe.

The crew has to get the jet ready for take-off when they arrive at the airport, so Chuuya and Dazai spend the time lounging outside and waiting for the sheep to arrive, their hands permanently interlinked.

It should feel strange. Instead it feels too relieving and too safe to be anything else.

Chuuya only works up the courage to try letting go when the car with his friends inside rolls up. The change isn’t sudden or powerful. There are no sudden attacks or that voice coming back to haunt him immediately. It’s taking one breath after another as he stares down at his hand, no longer in Dazai’s, and knowing even though right now he’s fine, that it’s not a promise.

The sound of car doors falling shut makes Chuuya tear his eyes away,

sliding his hands into the pockets of the hoodie that he changed it into after they finished getting answers from Kage.

“You’re okay?” Dazai asks, still next to him.

Nodding, Chuuya turns to look up at him. “Thank you, you know.”

Dazai’s smile is a weightless breeze on his face, the words *of course* spirited away by the wind before he lifts his hand to squeeze Chuuya’s shoulder in a wordless goodbye and turns to board the plane. Just in time for the sheep to catch up.

“Hey,” Yuan is the first to say with lines of worry glaring at him, “are you all right?”

“I don’t know. Yes. I kind of lost it there earlier.” Looking at the pavement under his feet is easier than seeing Yuan’s face, or the others’, because the pavement doesn’t have any expectations of him. “But I’m okay. I think I just need a long nap.”

Yuan’s eyes search his face for more than his flimsy explanation, not convinced, but in the end, she lets out a breath and nods. “Good. Okay.”

“I think we all need a nap,” Shirase mumbles with an awkward pitch in his voice. Out of the three of them, he looked the most nonplussed but also the most uncomfortable to see Chuuya freak out. Shirase’s gaze darts from him to the plane to Yuan before he ultimately slides his hands into the pockets of his parka and goes to enter the plane. Yuan follows him.

Chuuya wants to as well, but a hand snatching his wrist stops him from doing that.

Luca.

Of course it’s Luca.

“We have to talk for –”

“ *No* ,” Chuuya snaps and yanks his arms away with more force than necessary. “I’ve tried talking to you hundreds of times, and it’s always the same fucking thing. I’m sick of you questioning my every move, so no, we don’t. Not now.” Not in the mood for retaliation or even the mere hint of another glare, he stalks off and leaves Luca to talk to himself.

This time, he doesn’t have to think about where to sit. His feet carry him past the four-seater and to Dazai without any hesitation. Chuuya aggressively slams himself down next to him and grabs his hand just as violently, though that raging fire quickly melts into a slow, warm flame when Dazai doesn’t say anything and simply lets him.

If Chuuya is going to sleep, then he would much rather do it without having to worry about losing control just because he’s irritated.

Dazai can help.

That’s it.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys, hope you're all doing well <3 Thank you so much for all your love and support! I'm really, REALLY grateful because this fic is so much fun to work on and I'm beyond happy and thankful that so many other people are enjoying it as well! you're all the best and I wish you a good time until the next update (◠‿◠✿)

Next up we have:
- a goodbye
- a message
- a plea

Chapter 19: Scattering Sheep

Chapter Notes

> Hello, today I bring you another update >:) This is one of my favorite chapters ever, so I hope you enjoy it as well!!!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Twenty-four hours later the ice in Chuuya's lungs has melted and the world smells different again. Not frozen in a moment of weakness. Not cold and hard. Not slippery. But crisp, like the first staggering inhale of spring air.

Never mind that it's June. He is merely trying to remain positive while standing in front of his closet and contemplating what to do with all the clothes. The sheep won't want them, but he could sell them. They will need the money. Or he could leave them here since life on the street won't have any place for expensive silk shirts and shiny belts in mafia colors.

The only answer that comes to him, even after another five minutes of stupefied staring, is a sigh. Chuuya gives up and turns to Kafka who is nestled in a fort of blankets in the corner of the bedroom, instead.

"What am I going to do with you, huh?" He squats down to let his fingertips trace the callous scales curving around the shell. "I think you'd like the streets. Dragons are supposed to be creatures of air and freedom, right? That's where you belong, just like us. But…" Gravity tugs at Chuuya's mouth. "Someone would hear about you eventually; they'd try to get their hands on you, and you're still so small. I can't let that happen."

That's assuming the sheep don't try to use Kafka as a ball to play soccer with first – or get hungry and try to make scrambled eggs out of it.

Chuuya rests his cheek on his arm and scratches Kafka like he would scratch a cat's chin. "I'm sorry, little dragon, but I have to leave you behind."

The egg doesn't respond. It never does. Because it's only an egg, obviously, and ability-created or not, dragons simply don't exist.

"I'm sure Dazai will take care of you, though…

I will kick his ass if he doesn't."

They arrived back in Yokohama early in the morning. Even though Chuuya had already spent the entire flight knocked out next to Dazai, he was tired enough to continue sleeping in his bed for another twelve hours until he eventually woke up to catch the last rays of sunshine filtering through the cream-colored curtains in his bedroom. Groggy and slightly confused, but finally conscious enough to know what must be done.

So here he is, saying his goodbyes to the dragon egg because that's still somewhat easier than saying goodbye to the man a floor above.

But that has to wait until the very end anyway.

First Chuuya's going to tell the sheep. Discuss what to do and where to go from here. Their last permanent stay, an abandoned railway station, has probably been long since ransacked by another group of strays, so if they won't want to stay here while getting back on their feet – and he knows for a fact they won't – they need to find a place to sleep for tonight. And every single one after that.

A price worth paying for freedom, right?

Right, Chuuya thinks, rising to his feet and looking one final time at Kafka before turning away. A slightly oversized cord-brown jacket is lying on his dresser. It's not too mafia-looking but nothing like the tattered, black clothes that he used to wear either. Chuuya grabs it and slips into it on his way out of the door.

A part of him expects to see Dazai when the elevator doors slide open. Stepping inside the empty space makes everything else feel empty too, like the nothingness in here carves itself into Chuuya's organs as well. Hollows him out. It's just another area of life where the man has left a permanent mark. Wine. Lilies. Letters. Heat. Slumbering gods. And now, apparently, even elevators.

He's not as lucky as Dazai when it comes to them though, so the elevator pauses several times, letting people in and out, before it finally arrives on the floor where the sheep are housed. No one that Chuuya knows, but he catches a few fleeting glances sent his way, nonetheless. It makes sense. By now, a lot of port mafia members should have already heard about his promotion.

Little do they know that he will go down as the guy with the shortest time of having been an executive.

Three days.

Three short days.

There is an unusual lack of noise coming from the sheep's dorms – with the amount of people living together it's always loud, whether it's six in the morning or midnight, and an annoyingly persistent spark of hope flutters through his chest. Maybe, if most of his friends are out on jobs right now, they will have to wait another night to drum the band together.

And an entire night is a lot of time to say goodbye to someone.

In fact, Chuuya could even say goodbye repeatedly. Several times. In every single way he can think of to –

His third knock goes unanswered and that stubborn ball of flame stops swirling inside his chest in favor of holding its breath. The silence is odd, but not a single person being there to open the door is suspicious. There is no way all of them are suddenly out, especially when Yuan told him that they get called in once a week at most.

Chuuya waits exactly one slamming heartbeat before he kicks the door open. Any concern about property damage flies out of his mind as soon as he sees the state of their quarters.

Abandoned bunk beds. Half-opened, bare shelves. Not a single personal item that indicates that the sheep resided here for nearly two months.

All of it is gone.

All of them… just gone.

Chuuya's jaw hardens.

If this is some kind of port mafia set-up…

He will burn this place to the ground.

"Hey," he shouts, walking deeper into the apartment with brisk, jerky steps. There has to be something left behind. A clue. Anything.

The pointer comes in the form of a shelf and a dresser barricading the door.

Chuuya pauses, heart roaring in anticipation for the worst except…

barricades are meant to keep someone in a room which means that –

A second later, the furniture is carelessly shoved aside, and Chuuya pulls so hard and fast that he almost rips the door off its hinges only to come to a surprised stop.

“Yuan?”

Sitting against the bathtub with her hands tied behind her back and a makeshift gag in her mouth, Yuan growls out a muffled noise, her eyes wide and furious when Chuuya leans down to help her.

“That fucker,” she curses as soon as she can speak, followed by a soft hiss as Chuuya unties her hands and regards her with a bewildered frown.

“What happened?”

“Damn it, what do you think? Luca.” Yuan rubs the back of her head and blows out a lungful of air. “Luca happened.”

Bit by bit Chuuya’s unnerved confusion morphs into something else. Something slow and cold and hollow rather than the boiling rage a few seconds ago. His throat is paper-dry, but he somehow manages to ask, “Where are they, Yuan?”

“They left,” Yuan tells him in a thick, bitter voice, her eyes hard as she looks at him.

“What do you mean they left? Where did they go?”

“I mean that Luca drummed everyone together this morning, said that he had a way to get us ‘safely’ out of here, knocked me out for calling bullshit, and then they just *left* . They left the port mafia, and they left *us* .”

Every single muscle inside Chuuya stills. He repeats the words in his head over and over, word for word and syllable after syllable, yet no matter how many times he hears them, they don’t make any more sense.

People don’t just decide to leave one day without even telling you.

People that are supposed to be your friends and family don’t just wake up and –

“We have to go after them,” he hears Yuan say. She gets to her feet,

stalking out of the bathroom. “What time is it? If we hurry, we can catch up. We can find them.”

I mean that Luca drummed everyone together this morning, said that he had a way to get us ‘safely’ out of here, knocked me out for calling bullshit, and then they just left. They left the port mafia, and they left us.

They left us.

“Chuuya, snap out of it!” Yuan is suddenly in front of him and cupping his face. “You have to talk to Dazai and tell him not to punish them. Say that they’re scared or that it’s Luca, I don’t know, but do something! He’ll listen to you.”

Chuuya opens his mouth but instead of a response, raspy laughter staggers out, making his chin and shoulders quiver with the tremors that shudder through him.

“Stop *laughing* !”

“I’m sorry,” he manages to get out, and scrubs a hand over his face. “I’m sorry, I’m not – I’m not laughing. I just…”

“I know. I get it, okay?” Yuan sounds agitated but understanding. She always is. She hasn’t been the scared little girl that clings to Shirase’s arm and hides behind him for a long time now. “But you have to talk to Dazai before –”

“He won’t,” Chuuya cuts in. There is no laughter in his voice anymore. “Dazai won’t hurt them.”

When he lifts his gaze to Yuan, he is met with the same bewilderment that he felt upon entering the apartment.

His next words are quiet, but in the silence of the room, they pierce the hollow air like bullets. “Dazai gave me a choice. Stay here or leave… without any repercussions.” Chuuya lowers his eyes to the floor and smiles bitterly. “He said we could leave. I came down here to tell you.”

“That’s…” Yuan raggedly searches for words but doesn’t find them. He sees her arms cross tightly over her chest, head shaking over and over. “That’s not at all suspicious to you?” is what she ends up asking. “On the same day that Luca decides to turn all of our friends against us, Dazai suddenly decides that it’s okay for us to leave?”

Chuuya exhales another breath before saying, “Dazai gave me that choice two weeks ago.”

Yuan pauses, and this time, the stunned veil of hurt that drapes over her eyes is aimed at him. At Chuuya.

“You’ve known we could leave for two weeks,” she whispers, “and you didn’t tell me?”

“I…” Every word that comes to his mind sounds like a flimsy excuse. Too little for a betrayal this big. Not good enough to fix what he broke. “I needed time.”

“Time for *what?”* Yuan cries. “To decide what to do? You get an offer like that, you don’t think about it, Chuuya! You just take it and run as fast as you can!”

“I knew I’d choose to leave the moment he said the words! I still needed time! Time to wrap up loose ends! How was I supposed to know that Luca would just –”

“You did know! Luca said it about a hundred times, but you never listened!”

The accusation makes him rock to a sudden halt. Blinking, he looks at Yuan. “It’s my fault. That’s what you’re saying, isn’t it?”

Yuan lets out a harsh breath, face twisted into an expression of disappointment and anger as she glares at the ceiling. “I defended you every single time,” she hisses through clenched teeth, “because I thought that you were doing what you had to do. Shirase’s arrest wasn’t your fault. Luca’s stupidity wasn’t your fault. Dazai taking an interest in you wasn’t your fault. But we could have left this place weeks ago and you didn’t even tell us!? You chose him over us. You chose *Dazai* .”

Chuuya shakes his head. “No. I chose you. I will always fucking choose you. Just because I needed a minute to think it through – because it’s not like Dazai’s offers come without any fine print regulations – doesn’t make that choice any less real.”

“You needed that minute because you didn’t want to choose us!”

The words on his tongue dissolve. Chuuya takes a step forward only for her to step back like… like he will attack her for arguing with him or something. Like she doesn’t even trust him anymore.

“Yuan,” he whispers. “Please.”

“I think deep inside you wanted to stay. That’s why it took you so long, and that’s why you didn’t tell us.” Yuan takes a shuddering breath. “You feel responsible, so you convinced yourself that you chose us even though you didn’t. And you know what? I don’t blame you for that. You’re not indebted to anyone. No one’s forcing you to stay, for fuck’s sake, but I do blame you for robbing *us* of that choice. You took *my* choice away! I spent so much freaking time defending you that my own friends ended up knocking me out instead of taking me with them. They abandoned me, and that’s your fault. You did this. Not Luca. Not Shirase. Not even Dazai. *You.* ”

“We can catch up,” Chuuya mutters weakly, shoveling his way through the mountain of guilt in his breastbone. “You said if we hurry, we can still catch up, so let’s catch up.”

“I said that because I thought the port mafia would kill for deserting. That’s obviously not the case anymore.”

“That doesn’t mean that –”

“They left because they didn’t want you anymore, okay?”

The only sound that Chuuya really registers is the pathetic noise that he makes in the back of his throat.

“I’m sorry,” Yuan continues frantically, “but they sure as hell won’t take me back when I show up with you by my side. I’m not even sure they will if I come without you! I wasted too much of my time on the wrong side.” The curve of her lips is a grimacing parody of a smile. “Well, now I’m paying the price.”

“And what awful thing did I do to end up being cast out like this?” Chuuya hisses through gritted teeth.

Yuan looks away.

“You were all there in Osaka,” he tries. “You saw that he –”

“It’s because we were all there. We all saw how perfectly you work together. Or how much you rely on each other. Or how much that man cares about defending your fucking honor in your absence. And I tried telling myself that it doesn’t mean that you can’t still be a part of us, but I was wrong. Do you realize that Luca didn’t even do this to be petty or to replace you, but that he was scared?”

“Of what?!”

“Of *you* .”

Chuuya blanches.

Scared of him?

He gulps, sucks in a shallow breath. “That was - I - it was a shitty day and a shitty mission. I freaked out. It happens. It used to happen to me as a kid too, remember? I -”

“Not just because of that.”

But…

“What the hell do they think I’ll do? Take a liking to the mafia and kill you all in your sleep?”

“If Dazai orders you to, would you honestly refuse?”

Chuuya’s chin draws back. “You can’t be serious.”

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to believe anymore! I don’t think you would, but an hour ago I didn’t think you would hide something as important as that from me either!”

“So I fucked up!” he exclaims.

“You did! And now I’m stuck in an organization without my friends!” It stings more than a slap in the face, but Yuan is aiming for total annihilation. “I can’t do this. I’m not… I don’t want to stay here.” She marches to the closet in the room and starts shoving clothes into an empty bag. “I can’t believe this is happening.”

It’s like watching a car crash happen in slow motion. Chuuya sees it unfold in front of his eyes – Yuan packing her things so she can leave. Just like everyone else. Just like that. But he can’t do a single thing to stop it. Not without destroying everything in his wake anyway.

She keeps muttering insults under her breath until the bag on the floor is full and she zips it up with soundless tears slipping down her cheeks.

“I don’t even know where to look for them,” she hisses over the bag, “because Luca made some fucking deal with fuck knows who and knocked me out so I wouldn’t tell you. How the *hell* did I end up in

this position?!”

The answer becomes clear when her gaze fixes on Chuuya, though.

She ended up in this position because of him.

He did that.

The least he can do now is offer to fix it.

“I can help you find them.” Before she can tell him how his presence would sabotage her, Chuuya adds, “Just don’t tell them that. Tell them whatever they need to hear to take you back.”

But all she does is shake her head. “You’ve done enough.” Then she gets up, fingers curled around her bag, and her eyes meet Chuuya’s one last time, eyes glassy and red-rimmed before she turns and walks away.

Chuuya hears the screech of the tires and the inevitable sound of cars colliding. The slam of the door falling shut.

He hears his world fall apart and all he can do is stare.

And suddenly, time jumps back, and Yuan staggers back into the room with a look that’s half-agony, half-rage.

She came back.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers.

Her face crumples and she throws her arms around his neck with a broken sob that reverberates through both of them.

“I’m sorry,” he says again, clinging to her the same way she is clinging to him. “I’m so fucking sorry.”

“I don’t –” Her muffled voice cracks against his neck. “I don’t know what to do, Chuuya. They just… they left.”

Chuuya squeezes his eyes shut.

Yuan’s wet gasps shake with tears. “I want my friends back.”

She came back.

But the only reason she was still here in the first place is Chuuya.

She came back…

But she shouldn't stay.

"Then find them," he murmurs.

Yuan pulls back and hastily wipes at her eyes. "You're my friend too. I'm angry and hurt but –" she shakes her head, "— you're still my best friend."

"You don't have to stay just because of me." He manages a shaky smile. "I'll be fine as long as you're safe."

"I don't even know where they are," she whispers.

"You're smart, it will probably take you a day, at worst two, to figure it out."

"Chuuya…"

"It's okay. You can go."

She reaches out to squeeze his hands and nods shakily. "You take care of yourself, all right? Be careful. Don't trust too many people. Guard your back."

"Yeah. You too."

"I love you, you know that, right? Even though I hate you right now."

"I know." Chuuya returns her squeeze. "I love you too."

It takes her another few nods and shuddering inhales to finally let go, but this time, when Yuan leaves, she doesn't come back.

***

"It's strange," Dazai murmurs and turns to his friend. "Don't you think, Jiji?"

The cat, who has been jeopardizing his desk and thus his work for a nap, blinks in reply.

"After all this time, one might think he would at least bother to say goodbye. But perhaps I was wrong about that."

Perhaps he is wrong about a lot of things. A thought that haunts his

every breath when he forgets to shove it away for too long – and he forgets more and more lately. The possibility that all his calculations from the last few years of his life that have led to this, and still lead to every moment, are wrong and that he will ultimately fail. Fail at the possibly most and only important task in his life.

And maybe, if it *only* concerned him, he could live with failing.

But it doesn't.

So he can't.

The insistent buzzing of his phone cuts through the whirlpool of thoughts. He squints as he picks it up and lets it play on the speaker.

"Boss, it's me," Gin says. "There's this, uh, thing that I think you'll want to know about?"

Drawing lazy circles into Jiji's fur, Dazai sighs. "Let's find out then."

"The barman of the "Old World" bar called and said one of ours was causing a ruckus there." The only reason why the drunken actions of a mafioso should be of any interest to him is the identity of said mafioso, so Dazai waits for them to go on patiently. "It's Chuuya, boss."

Ah.

Pieces of information start vibrating, dancing in circles and then –

Then they connect to a full picture.

So that is what is going on.

The sheep left the premises twelve hours ago, with packed bags and flimsy undercover clothes to stay "low" and all. Just without any word whatsoever.

Dazai has been theorizing why that was. (Why Chuuya hasn't been spotted with them as well.)

He assumed Chuuya would catch up.

But getting hammered at a bar, a mafia-affiliated one nonetheless, is the opposite of catching up. There are only so many reasons for Chuuya to be there instead of gone.

A smile grows on his face as he hums and pokes Jiji's nose. It's moist. "Old World you say, huh?" Gin confirms it. "Tell the man to let Chuuya do as he pleases for now. I'll take care of it."

"Do you want me to send someone for him, boss?"

"Nope."

Gin's silence is hesitant, as it always is when Dazai ventures outside of his office himself rather than letting his subordinates do his dirty work. But they have done this job for too many years now to bother arguing about it. "I'll call him then."

"Wonderful. Thank you, Gin. Have a good night." He ends the call before they can reply.

Dazai doesn't need them to wish him an equally pleasant night because he already knows he will have one.

Well.

Pleasant might be the wrong word, all things considered, because Chuuya will be a mess and Dazai will have to pick up the pieces rather than the man. But he's always been a fan of puzzles.

"Forget what I said before," Dazai tells Jiji, rising to his feet. "I'm never wrong."

***

The *Old World* is a mafia-affiliated shop that usually serves as the playground for the port mafia's young people association – which also goes by the name "the Flags".

However, today it serves as the playground for one person to drink themselves into a stupor.

That's the first thing Dazai sees when he enters anyway.

Chuuya, slumped over an obscenely full glass of wine at the bar, destroying napkins with his hands.

The bartender, a middle-aged man that goes by the name Sota, is polishing glasses in the corner. He greets Dazai with a polite bow of his head and starts preparing his regular order. The only sign that

Chuuya isn't too sloshed to recognize him is the dry huff that blows out of his nose when Dazai joins him.

"Having fun?"

Chuuya finally glances at him, even though it's only to mutter, "you're here."

"I am."

"You're *always* here."

"I go where I'm needed," Dazai says with a small shrug and gives the bartender a signal. Shortly before Mori first made him an executive, he was part of the flags as well. Not so much because he felt like making friends and connections, but rather to gain valuable inside knowledge and trust. The latter turned out to be just as valuable once he took over the mafia himself.

"So, you heard?" The smile Chuuya conjures up drips with intoxicated self-depreciation and irony. "I'm allll alone now. The sheep are gone. Yuan's gone. Everyone's gone. 's just me now."

Although it will not mean much coming from Dazai, he says the words anyway. "I'm sorry, Chuuya." Not because he mourns the collapse of the little lambs but because he knows just how much they meant to Chuuya.

Chuuya responds with a bitter snort. "Why? I thought 's what you wanted. The sheep are gone, and I have nowhere else to go, so…" His fist uncurls and falls on the counter silently. Gently almost. "I might as well stay. Who cares. 's even better than the deal you offered me."

"They left but it doesn't bind you to stay."

Chuuya could still go. He could even start a life somewhere, an actual one. With an education, a job. Relationships. He could.

But the shadow that falls over his face confirms a theory that Dazai came up with a long time ago.

"You don't want me here either?" Chuuya breathes out.

Dazai doesn't do merciful. Not really. But the smile he feels tug at his mouth is as merciful as they come. "I wanted you here from the very beginning and I still do. I will have you every way that you let me.

What I'm saying is that you might want something different."

Chuuya's chest falls with a breath, then his eyes flutter away and close. "Everything I wanted is already gone, Dazai. There's nothing left."

That Dazai understands.

He does.

"What about what you *don't* want?" he murmurs. "Do what you need to do so you won't have to do what you don't want. It's how I've been navigating most of my life."

The look Chuuya sends him is louder than any insult, and somehow even that Dazai understands. Sometimes he thinks he understands Chuuya a little too well. So he accepts the glass of whiskey that Sota slides over with a nod and stares at the golden liquid inside like it's the mirror that will give him the answers to the secrets of the universe.

A few minutes pass before Chuuya shifts in his seat and speaks. "I don't want to leave."

Dazai flicks the glass with his fingernail. "Stay then." Live this tale with me just one more time. "You will have a place here for as long as you want and need."

"Executive, huh…" Chuuya brings the glass of wine to his mouth, taking a few sips so vigorous that Dazai is positive the room will be spinning by the time he will be done. Afterwards he reaches inside his jacket and fishes out the pin that Dazai gave him. "Guess I'll actually have to start wearing this then."

Words alone will be more than enough to grant him respect and authority wherever he goes, but Dazai won't contradict him when the silver sheen of the pin reflects the icy depth of Chuuya's eyes so brilliantly.

"You can order your friends to be brought back in," Dazai tells him in a matter-of-fact tone. "You have that privilege now, you know."

"No." Then Chuuya drills his gaze into him. "And you don't either."

"The sheep are yours, Chuuya. What you do or don't do with them is up to you. However…" Dazai meets his gaze. "I would be careful.

They don't know enough to cause any real damage, but our enemies don't care about that."

"You think someone could go after them?" Within the blink of an eye, any traces of bitterness and guilt are washed away by concern. It's just like Chuuya to be worried about the same people that just up and left him to fend for himself. Just like the sheep, too.

"It's possible."

His jaw clenches and for a moment he looks so torn apart by all the troubling emotions that Dazai doesn't notice the way his fingers tightly curl around his glass until it's too late and it shatters into a thousand tiny pieces. Chuuya's anger thins out into a slightly dumb-founded frown as he glances at his hand, now bloody and full of shards like he's not sure himself how that happened.

"You just have to make a mess everywhere you go, hm?" Dazai murmurs as the bartender already hurries over with a rag and a broom.

Chuuya's eyes flick up to him only to roll back. "Fuck off. I had a bad day."

"At least, take the shards out. Your fancy ability is good for that, no?"

"No." And he turns away, with shards and all, choosing to stare at it instead of fixing it. It's the pouty curve of his mouth that gives away how drunk he is right now. "Don't feel like focusing right now."

It leaves Dazai no other choice but to take matters into his own hand – quite literally, in fact. Leaning over, he steals Chuuya's mess of skin and fingers and blood and starts picking out the pieces while he keeps a tight grip on his wrist to stop him from getting away.

Chuuya doesn't, though. He watches Dazai work.

"Tell me something," he says after a while.

Dazai's fingers continue pulling glass out of skin, but his eyes lift. "Like what?"

"I dunno. Something. Don't feel like the scales are even between us right now… They never fucking are."

"Why don't you ask me and maybe I'll answer."

Chuuya grunts out a breath, then rests his chin on one hand, eyes fluttering closed and open a few times. “Why’d you come here?”

“I figured you’d need someone to escort you home before you decided to do something reckless like get on your bike.”

“That’s all? You just want to be my babysitter?”

“Does there have to be something more?”

“Thought I’m the one asking the questions.”

“I already answered yours.”

“Why can’t you just admit it?” Chuuya barks out.

Dazai feels the corner of his mouth tilt. “Admit what, Chuuya?”

“You know what,” is the flippant reply.

“You will have to be a bit more specific than that.”

“You know, for a port mafia boss, you’re pretty childish. If you want something, say it. Stop with the games and shit. Just fucking say it.”

“If I’m so childish, why can’t you say it? Maybe I’m slow.”

“You are slow,” Chuuya says with a poignant *tsk* and points at his head. “Just not here.”

“Oh? Where am I slow then?”

Dazai is about to get strangled, but he much prefers this expression on Chuuya over the bleak emptiness that resided in him when he stared at his hand – the one that is now free of any splinters – and it’s too easy to get him out of that place not to make use of it all the time.

“I swear I’m gonna kill you someday.” For such a grand declaration, Chuuya looks extremely comfortable with his hand in Dazai’s. “Nice and slow until you stop feeling so full of yourself all the time.”

“Mmm, tell me all about it.”

“Gonna chop you up and feed you the strays outside.”

“So Chuuya wants to serve me as a meal?” Tugging at the gauze around his neck until it starts unraveling, Dazai lifts his gaze long

enough to offer a heated smile. “How spicy.” Then his mouth gets busy tearing the bandages in two, so he can use it to tie a knot. Something that doesn’t go unnoticed.

“Not like you don’t present yourself as one.”

Dazai’s brows lift in startled surprise.

But Chuuya’s intoxication level must have already reached the shamelessly blunt level. “Don’t act so shocked. Taking off your bandages like that.. you might as well be naked.”

“Chuuya.”

“I see right through you,” he prattles on, looking at Dazai with narrowed eyes like his life depends on it. “It’s a tactic of yours, isn’t it? Making yourself look all pretty and perfect, practically stripping in public –”

“I am doing *no* such thing.”

“—to make me do stupid things while never ever doing anything yourself. That’s your plan, right?”

“I do plenty of stuff myself,” Dazai chirps out with a stifled grin. He is fond of all versions of Chuuya, but drunk Chuuya just shot up to the top five. “And while all of this is very flattering, it also sounds a lot like you’re the one who is searching for excuses to find me attractive.” He feels Chuuya’s hand itch to get away, but manages to keep it secured just in time, pulling it, and thus Chuuya, even closer. “Which you don’t have to, you know. There is nothing wrong with a bit of physical attraction.”

“You don’t have to tell me that like I’m some inexperienced child,” Chuuya snaps. “ *I* kissed you, remember? Not the other way around. I did that. Me.”

“Right, the kiss. How was that by the way?” If Dazai happens to be extra careful with wrapping gauze around his hand, then that’s a pure coincidence and not to feel the shiver that runs over it. “Because you broke it off awfully early. Almost as if something was wrong with it.”

In Chuuya’s defense, that little tremor quickly hardens to stone in the shape of an unimpressed glare. “Well, I don’t know about the other people you do this sort of thing with, but I didn’t really feel like screwing in your office.”

“I guess it would have been beneficial to have a bed a wall away… oh, wait.”

“You know what? Fuck you. This is exactly what I’m talking about. You could have said something, or not let me go, but you didn’t, so you don’t get to act all smug about it now. And by the way, one fucking kiss doesn’t always lead to sex. Sometimes it’s just a kiss and that’s all.”

“Two.”

“What?”

“Two kisses,” Dazai corrects for the sake of validity… and to be annoying. “Not just one.”

Chuuya’s frown is so scandalized that Dazai might as well have declared to be stronger than him or something as atrociously false as that. “The other one doesn’t count. *Nothing* from Osaka counts.”

“If you say so.”

“I do say so.”

“Okay, Chuuya.”

“ *Okay* me all you want but you know what?” Leaning that much closer, he stabs a finger into Dazai’s chest. “I think you want me,” he declares, chin held high and unyielding.

“Oh?”

“I’m not stupid enough to believe that all of your efforts, everything, was just to get me into bed, but you still want me. You just refuse to admit it and manipulate me into wanting you back instead.”

“And,” Dazai murmurs, “is it working?”

A spark of his usual temper flares up in his eyes, but Chuuya quickly stomps it out in favor of crossing the last few breaths that separate them until his lips are hovering right above Dazai’s, foreheads touching.

“Yes,” he whispers and deliberately lets their mouths brush without ever actually meeting, “but not bad enough to not be able to resist it. I’m not a fucking dog that’s going to chase after a nice-looking bone. You do something if you want it that bad.”

Yet he still doesn't pull away, giving Dazai the opportunity to prove himself right here and now.

It's a lucrative offer, for sure…

And if Chuuya wants him to take over so he doesn't have to, Dazai will gladly do it and –

Bzzzzzzzzzzzz.

Chuuya's eyes fall closed in time with the fist that slams the bar counter. "I'm going to fucking kill someone."

"I'm afraid someone already beat you to that," Dazai murmurs with a sigh as he fishes out the phone, the one that's reserved for urgent matters only – and those always involve murders in one way or another — and presses it to his ear. "Yes?"

"Boss, it's Gin. A team on patrol found one of ours dead."

Across from him, Chuuya turns to the counter and pours himself more wine. He leaves one hand on Dazai's thigh, though. The weight of it is oddly reassuring.

"So?" he asks somewhat impatiently. Mafiosi always die, and although it isn't pretty, it also isn't special enough to disturb him at this time of night.

"Most likely by the Bishop's staff. You said to alert you if that –"

"I know, I know, Gin." This time the patience is less boiling heat and more electrical overload as his mind starts spinning with calculations and possibilities. "Send me the address. I'll take a look myself."

"Boss, are you sure…? The team at the site will report to you as soon as possible."

"Of course I'm sure. Send me the address. Thanks."

When he hangs up, Chuuya is still eagerly sipping his wine.

"How drunk are you?" Dazai wants to know.

The fingers on his thigh tighten but he doesn't look at him. "Drunk enough to find you attractive apparently."

"So… very?"

“No,” is the even more irritated reply. “Just fucking tipsy.”

Hammered then.

Dazai considers leaving him here and quickly decides against it. He also considers escorting him home first, but that will take too much time, especially with Chuuya like this.

“Let’s take a walk,” he suggests, getting up from the highchair. “It won’t take long, promise.”

“Whatever,” Chuuya grumbles and finishes his glass before hopping to the ground and – pretty much falling over immediately… if not for the tainted sorrow, which manages to keep him upright. “Woah. When’d everything start moving so qui—” A hiccup interrupts him. Then another one. “— so quickly…?”

“Since you decided to chug wine like it’s water,” Dazai answers as he places one hand on his shoulder, the other one on his waist. “How’s that? Feeling somewhat steadier?”

“I’m always steady. ‘s the room that’s spinning!”

“Ah, but of course. Why in the world would the room do that?”

“How the hell would I know?”

“Aren’t you the king of gravity?”

“But I don’t make things spin. I just make ‘em hard.” And then, as if realizing that his words are a double-edged sword, he adds, “very hard.”

Dazai’s laughter traverses places as they reach the door that takes them into the deep night.

Chuuya hiccups again. His eyes flutter from the various Mafiosi that have been stationed outside the bar to Dazai. “’s a lot of people here,” he whispers.

A lot of them that could give them a ride to the address, but Dazai decides to take a stroll instead, nudging Chuuya in the right direction with the hand on his back.

For a few minutes, it’s just them, the occasional crunch of litter underfoot, and the far-off wail of sirens in the distance… until Chuuya fishes out a cigarette from somewhere and starts cursing under his

breath as he fumbles through pockets with no success.

“Someone give the man a lighter,” Dazai says.

Ten seconds later ten different arms are stretching out to offer Chuuya to light the cigarette in his mouth. It makes him blink, startled. Then he shrugs and accepts it, blowing out the smoke of his first drag with a satisfied sigh.

“How is it that –” Hiccup. “—that you apparently spent years hidden away in an impenetrable tower but now you’re constantly running around and putting yourself in danger?”

Dazai’s lips curve. “Maybe I was waiting for the right time to come out.”

“And what right time was that?” Chuuya pauses. “Not me, right?”

“Suddenly it’s not about you?”

“As if you were making decisions based on me years before we even met. I’m not mental.”

“Or maybe,” Dazai sing-songs, “maybe you just believe I spent two years never stepping foot outside. Barely anyone knows what I look like. What makes you think they would recognize me if I did?”

To Chuuya’s credit, he doesn’t appear to be surprised to hear that, not even in his drunken state. Instead, a thoughtful shadow falls over his face. “Have we met before?”

Dazai looks at him at the same time as Chuuya meets his gaze.

“Before you offered to get Shirase out of jail, I mean,” he elaborates, keeping the slur in his voice at bay this time as if to match the tone of the conversation. “Have we ever met?”

A distorted image flickers in front of Dazai’s eyes.

The cold caress of metal against skin. Bright, fluorescent lights. The smell of formaldehyde.

It gets easily buried in the mountain of other memories stored somewhere far, far away, too many of them to keep in the forefront in his mind all the time – without succumbing to insanity, at least.

The answer to that question never leaves his mouth because they step

from one warzone into another.

The alley that they have been following leads to a dead end with a corpse lying in the center. It's a woman. Hamasaki Yuji. On her back, arms spread, torso twisted in a way that promises that the circumstances of her end were none too pretty. The puddle of blood around her paints her a pair of magnificent wings, stretching wide enough that one tip of it grazes the point of Dazai's shoe when he and Chuuya come to a stop.

Surrounding her are some of the port mafia's most deadly members and their subordinates. Atsushi Nakajima. Kyouka Izumi. Hirotsu Ryurou. Tachihara Michizou. All of whom go down on one knee in respect and obedience.

Dazai feels the reluctant weight of Chuuya's eyes on him, and he twists two fingers in the back of his shirt to keep him on both his feet as he lets his eyes roam around the scene before returning them to the present that was left for them. For him.

"Someone's been busy," he observes out loud, letting go of Chuuya so he can walk over to the corpse and squat down to swipe a finger through the bloody piece of art. It comes away thick, somewhat clotted. It tastes like raw iron when he brings it to his mouth to confirm that it is indeed the victim's blood, not just paint.

Of course it is.

Hamasaki looks like there is barely any blood left inside her.

Rising back to his feet, he slides his hands into the pockets of his coat. "She was killed deep in mafia territory. That's a rather bold move."

"It's arrogant," Tachihara mutters. "They'll pay double the price for it."

"And yet they got away and one of ours is dead." Dazai's tone might sound amused, but only a fool would mistake that for actual delight. Whether the strings are pulled by a rat, or not, his people should be useful enough to catch the perpetrator in the act. "Get her to the pathologist and search every centimeter of the entire block to get us someone alive," he orders. "The Bishop's Staff sent us an angel of death. It seems we're about to enter a challenging wartime."

They have been dealt the temperance card.

It’s starting, it’s starti—

“Are you insane?” someone whisper-hisses behind him as his people jump into action, and Dazai curiously turns around only for Chuuya to grab his finger and alternate between glowering daggers at it and at him. “Don’t put shit like that in your mouth. What if it was poisoned?”

“What if someone shot me right now?” Dazai counters with an unperturbed grin.

“What if I punched you in the face?” he replies in a parroting voice.

“It all boils down to the same thing, Chuuya. Nothing is safe. Everything…” His thumb wiggles out of its clutch to lift to the drunk man’s mouth instead, smearing the dirty speck of blood over his bottom lip. “And I mean everything, can turn around and kill you.”

It's addicting to watch the dark bottomless ocean which sinks upon Chuuya's eyes, eclipsing the bright shades of blue.

“You just have to figure out what’s worth dying for.”

Dazai thankfully has the mind to see his lips part and return his hand to safety before Chuuya can chomp down on his finger with his teeth – not half-heartedly either. Chuuya never does anything without giving it his all.

“Fucking doubt this is worth it,” Chuuya mutters and waves his hand over the corpse after another scolding glare in his direction. “What’s this shit anyway? They think they’re artists now?”

“Angels are messengers of god,” Dazai murmurs. “This is a declaration.”

“A declaration… you mean, a declaration of war?”

“Our organizations are built on opposing beliefs. It’s been inevitable from the start.”

With a flippant click of his tongue, Chuuya flicks his cigarette to the ground and stomps it out, only wavering for one second. “Now what?”

“Now I get you home. You will need a good night’s rest to sleep off your hangover.”

“I don’t do hangovers,” he proclaims, whirling his head around. “And ’m not that drunk.”

“Maybe if you say it again, I’ll believe you.”

***

Chuuya is drunk.

It takes an entire hour to get him into a car, take him back to the headquarters, convince him that riding the elevator is just as fun as climbing the building and breaking into his own apartment, and eventually, coax him out of the elevator instead of letting him pay a visit to Jiji.

By the time the door is falling closed behind him, Dazai feels like he completed a full workout.

And the actual climax of Chuuya’s inebriety hasn’t even made an appearance yet.

“I just don’t understand,” he grumbles with a slurred lilt in his voice as he not only slips out of his shoes but kicks them across the room. “You never minded me in your stupid bed before. What’s wrong with it now?”

“Nothing is wrong with it. I simply believe that –” Dazai pauses to help him out of his jacket when it looks like he will tear it apart in his impatience. “I think you should wake up in your own bed tomorrow when your memories decide to fail you.”

“That’s the most… stupidest thing I have heard, and I’ve heard a lottttt of stupid things.” Chuuya shoots him a look over his shoulder. “You stupid, Dazai?”

The earnest deliverance of that question makes him smile. “Apparently. Do you want something to eat before you pass out?”

Chuuya doesn’t deem that worthy of an answer, striding past him into the kitchen with a dismissive wave…

… and heading straight to the fridge where he digs out another bottle of wine.

White, this time.

That can’t end well.

But telling Chuuya not to do something is only adding fuel to the fire.

The trick is always a gentle coaxing in the right direction. Like that time Jiji decided to explore the passageways outside the office and Dazai had to bribe her to come back with an unhealthy number of treats.

So he pointedly doesn't say anything in regard to the glass of wine that Chuuya pours himself with the help of for the tainted sorrow, spilling half of it, but not really, because gravity takes care of that too. Instead, Dazai grabs a few things from the pantry and makes himself comfortable in the kitchen.

"What are you doing?" Chuuya demands to know.

"Cooking. I'm starving."

"Oh."

He lasts exactly two minutes before he ends up creeping closer to get a better look, lingering next to the fridge like he came for something else when in reality he is blatantly staring at the sausages that Dazai is unpacking.

It's too funny not to savor it for at least a minute, but since he started this charade with this exact goal in mind, Dazai has to finish it as well.

"Want one?" he asks, offering Chuuya a chopped off piece of sausage

Chuuya steals it out of his hand with a sullen pout on his face. One that softens into something lighter by the time he finishes swallowing it down.

"Did you know that former royalty used to let their servants test every drink and every piece of food for them first?" The oil in the pan starts sizzling loudly, probably just like someone else is about to. "Chuuya's kind of like that ~"

Though Dazai must have underestimated him. The reply is less explosive. Just an exasperated, "fuck off."

"Ah, but you're right. It's not me who is the king."

"I'm not," Chuuya says, the heat entirely replaced by an uncannily distant tone. "Not anymore."

It's Dazai's fault for going there. Then again perhaps that's the point. Pretending to be nothing but kind and caring would be a lie that not even someone like him could convince himself into believing. He is selfish. He has a touch of cruelty. He craves the blood that he would draw by digging his fingers into the sore spot until the slumbering beast awakens.

But he also made a vow.

And right now protecting Chuuya means also shielding him from the ghosts of the friends who abandoned him.

"The sheep weren't the ones who made you king," Dazai says with a shrug as he pokes the sizzling sausages. "That was all you. But you know what? Royalty is outdated anyway."

Chuuya's hard gaze flickers to him, then back to the food, so Dazai offers him another piece of sausage. This time, he accepts it without another word.

That is how they spend the next fifteen minutes: eating sausages straight from the stove, not sharing many words except for the occasional hums and empty commentary, only there to fill the void, the fruitless bottle of wine forgotten – and a raging headache hopefully avoided when Chuuya mutters that he needs to go piss and disappears in his room down the corridor.

The next few minutes pass in suspicious silence, not even the sound of doors falling closed or toilets flushing. It raises alarm bells in Dazai.

The only times Chuuya isn't loud is when he is unconscious, which shouldn't be the case right now.

A rather pitiful picture greets him instead. Chuuya sitting on the edge of the bed, and his hands clutched around a bag filled with clothes. He doesn't look up to see Dazai hover in the doorway, but he doesn't need to.

"I packed my stuff this morning," Chuuya murmurs. "I went to tell them that we can leave." A bitter laugh slips past his lips as he shakes his head. "And they were already gone. Without even a single word."

For the first time in a while, Dazai finds himself without a response. Not because there isn't anything to say but because he is not the right person to do it. Not when he wasn't ever good at goodbyes either.

The only thing he can think of is walking over to the bed and sitting down next to Chuuya.

After a while he offers, “I had five siblings, and all of them are dead. Three of them because of me.”

Chuuya’s blank expression cracks like frozen ice, slowly but with impact. He looks at Dazai and blinks.

“A truth for a truth,” Dazai reminds him. “Remember?”

“Oh,” he whispers, posture crumpling even more.

Dazai always finds human nature fascinating right up until the point he doesn’t. Seeing Chuuya, powerful in all areas in life whether it’s with or without his ability, with or without Arahabaki, wilt like a flower because of people that aren’t even remotely on par with him is terrifying instead. Uncomfortable, too.

Dazai feels like he is seeing something fundamentally wrong that goes against all logical laws of nature happen. A comet changing directions. The ocean set ablaze. Time falling apart.

That’s why he gives Chuuya’s shoulder a playful bump, relying on the oldest play in the book to get him out of that hole he is digging himself into. “Chuuya wasn’t even going to say goodbye to me after all the time we spent together? That stings.” He places a hand over his chest and sighs dramatically. “I’m really hurt.”

Magic happens.

“I was going to say goodbye,” Chuuya, of course, instantly retorts with an offended scowl that suits him so much better than the hollow expression suspended in time. “After telling them, I was going to go up and say goodbye.”

“Chuuya’s just saying that to appease me,” Dazai declares.

“Am not. And why the fuck would I ever try to appease you? Don’t get cocky now, shitty Dazai.”

Dazai’s lips press together to contain the fond smile that wants to break free. “Fine. Maybe it wasn’t because of that, but Chuuya is still lying. I just know these things, trust me. I can feel it right here in my heart.”

Chuuya jabs his elbow into his ribs – and completely underestimates the force of it so that Dazai ends up wheezing for air for a second, grumbling under his breath. “Shut up. Believe what you want to believe but don’t call me a liar. I was going to say goodbye. I had plans.”

“Plans?” Dazai echoes with peaked interest.

“Plans,” Chuuya confirms… without elaborating.

“What kind of plans?”

“Just plans.”

“Come on, Chuuya, don’t be so greedy. Tell me.”

He feels Chuuya's eyes slide to him tentatively and meets them with an expectant grin. Chuuya blinks back like a deer caught in the headlights.

“No, I don’t think I will,” he blurts out and gets to his feet, spinning around to face Dazai and place his hands on his hips. “Because I already told you that I’m not a fucking dog, especially not yours. So figure it out yourself since you love to parade yourself around as the smartest person in the universe anyway.”

So that’s what it was supposed to be about.

Not shocking given the circumstances, definitely flattering, but most of all, enough to occupy most of Chuuya’s emotions and leave him no time to be sad about the heartbreak that’s going to follow him for the next while.

As far as Dazai is concerned, his job here is done.

Well… Chuuya still needs to go to bed without setting something aflame, but that’s child’s play in comparison.

"Fine," Dazai says, shoulder lifting in half-shrug. “Keep your secrets.”

Chuuya’s eyes narrow skeptically before he spins on his heels again and strides into the bathroom that’s attached to his bedroom. Dazai hears the water faucet turn on.

Good.

That means he’s getting ready for bed.

Dazai uses that time to fluff his pillows and straighten his bedsheets so he will be able to slide right into bed once he's done, then he packs away the bag of clothes into a corner of the closet where Chuuya most likely won't see it unless he specifically looks for it. The sounds from the bathroom are suspiciously silent right now, but Dazai refrains from checking up on him just yet in order to clean up a bit in the kitchen and get a cold bottle of water.

When he comes back, Chuuya's still in bed even though it's been a while.

"Chuuya?" he calls, hovering near the bathroom and feeling oddly awkward doing so. "Either you confirm that you're alive, or I'll have to come in and see for myself."

…

"Chuuya."

…

Sighing, Dazai grabs the doorknob and pulls the door open.

Chuuya is in the bathtub, which is thankfully empty and dry, head lolled sideways as he has somehow managed to fall asleep. A black yukata is covering him, though it's been tied loosely enough that it reveals a few patches of chest and inked shoulders.

Dazai has a thing for puzzles, is good at them too, but he can't even begin to understand how Chuuya ended up like this. Did he mistake the tub for his bed? Did he get tired and decided to sit down and accidentally fall asleep? Did he refuse to come out because Dazai was there?

The list of questions to ask is endless.

Dazai leans down to him and pokes his cheek. "Wake up, sleeping beauty," he murmurs. "This isn't your bed."

Chuuya doesn't react.

Even though Dazai saw his chest fall and rise peacefully up until now, he still grabs his wrist and lifts it to his ear to deny the stupid pang of fear that seizes his entire breastbone for a moment.

Nope.

Still very much alive.

Just drunk and exhausted.

“Chuuya, come on,” he tries again, shaking him by the shoulders this time. “If you don’t get up, I’ll have to do it for you, and we both know you’ll end up throwing a fit.” Nothing. Dazai brings his mouth to Chuuya’s ear-shell and lowers his voice to a conspiratorial whisper, just in case, “Do you really want me to carry you to your bed like a princess? Doesn’t the idea of that just enrage you? Chuuya?”

If that won’t wake him up, then nothing will.

Which means that Dazai has no other choice but to make his threat come alive.

He considers the logistics of it for a second, slips out of his jacket and lets it crumple to the floor, and then slides one arm under Chuuya’s shoulder blades, the other under his lower back before lifting him up with a ragged grunt slipping out of him.

Chuuya’s pretty short and small in stature but there is a lot of muscle hiding under that deceitful frame. Not to mention that right now he’s pretty much dead weight, even heavier, head lolling to the side, forcing Dazai to readjust the grip on him so it can at least press against his chest instead of dangling uselessly in the air.

It’s only fifteen steps to get to the bed, at most, but Dazai is going to be damned if he’s not going to do this right.

It’s then that Chuuya stirs slightly, though only to smack his lips together and hum something in his sleep.

After Dazai forces himself to drag his eyes away again, he crosses the threshold to the bedroom and bends down to deliver the sleeping beauty into his bed. He has almost managed to execute his mission without any hick-ups when Chuuya’s hand shoots forward and wraps around the arm sliding out from under him.

Dazai stills like a statue.

For a second that is frozen in time, nothing happens.

Then he tries to slip out of the grip, but that’s a mistake as it only tightens, painfully so.

“No,” Chuuya mumbles with half of his face mushed against his pillow. *“Don’t.”*

Dazai stops trying to slither out of the clutch, yet he doesn’t come any closer either.

“Don’t leave like everyone else.” His eyes flutter open then, revealing something deep and broken. “Just stay.”

It’s the dizzying sensation of looking at a reflection of himself even though there is no mirror here that makes Dazai nod slowly. He lifts his other hand to squeeze the fist that Chuuya is making around him, a silent reassurement that he isn’t going anywhere, but that he just wants to walk around the bed, so he can climb in.

He doesn’t lift the duvet, only settles on top of it as he lies down on the side that faces Chuuya’s back, his hand propping his head.

A moment later, Chuuya rolls around and mirrors the position even if his head is resting against his pillow.

“I thought you were asleep,” Dazai murmurs, not sure whether it’s an apology or statement himself. The lines have the nasty habit of blurring whenever Chuuya is around, manipulating not only gravity but the entire order of the universe itself.

Chuuya doesn’t answer him for a long time, looking like someone asleep with his eyes half-open. Dazai starts to feel the relaxing feeling of the bed and the dark atmosphere in the room coaxing his eyelids to flutter with temptation when Chuuya speaks.

“Did you like your siblings?”

Dazai lets heavy air slip out of his chest. “I thought I didn’t. For a long time, I was convinced they were only bothersome competition that were in my way, but… they were still important. I think I would like them now.”

Chuuya lets that linger for a moment, then asks, “how did you cope afterwards?”

Meaning after Dazai had to kill most of them while watching the other two kill each other.

“I didn’t,” he admits. “I’m not the best person to ask for advice on dealing with grief, Chuuya.”

“But you’re still here.” Chuuya swallows. “You’re… you.”

And the Dazai that he refers to is barely even the tip of the iceberg that’s hiding underneath – half of which, even Dazai himself hasn’t had the courage to inspect yet. Not when the tip is already more than enough to carry around.

“Various mental issues,” Dazai jokes weakly. “Remember?”

Chuuya’s responsive huff of breath is as fleeting as the curve on his mouth. The empty look of sheer desolation crawls back on his face way too soon, bathing his eyes in shadows.

“Dazai,” he says after another pause and this time there is a note of breathless desperation that makes Dazai’s stomach clench long before Chuuya extends his arm to twist his fingers in his shirt.

The silence grows thicker.

Chuuya wiggles closer until he’s a breath away, close enough for Dazai to smell the minty scent of the toothpaste that he must use. *“Dazai,”* he breathes out again, this one word asking a thousand things all at once.

“Chuuya,” he murmurs, voice thick.

“Remember when you said that I need to have some fun? Lose some tension?” The words ghost over Dazai’s cheek, his jaw, his lips as Chuuya nudges his face against his, leaving only a tiny width of empty space between them. “I think you should help me do that.”

“What happened to I’m not a dog that will chase you?”

It’s incredible how even that reminder falls completely short, simply bouncing off Chuuya’s desperate need to feel better with a soft exhale. “Just this one time.” His fingers curl tighter, subconsciously drawing Dazai closer. “I’ll beg just this once.”

And the image of Chuuya, *his Chuuya,* begging does drape the offer in sinfully tempting lights.

Dazai brings his hand up to his neck, stroking the skin there before curving around it to keep him still as he tilts his face and brings his mouth closer. Just not to Chuuya’s lips. “Not like this.”

Not when he is drunk. Not when he’s dizzy with exhaustion, barely

able to keep his eyes open for more than three seconds. And not when this is less of a question, and more of a mental breakdown.

Chuuya's heavy breathing stills. For a moment, Dazai expects him to rip away from him and hide on his side of the bed because getting angry over a rejection of this kind is easier than processing the other rejection.

So he doesn't quite know what to do when Chuuya only nods and sniffs, inching back a tiny bit but still staying close, still letting Dazai touch him.

After a second of hesitation, Dazai lifts the hand to cup his cheek instead, stroking the wild, messy curls out of his face and behind his ear in a gesture that he would find reassuring if it was him in Chuuya's place.

No words fall between them.

Chuuya doesn't make any noise, but Dazai's thumb grazes wet skin when he continues to stroke his face. He rubs it away with the rest of it.

At some point, when Chuuya's breathing evens out into something steady and peaceful, he slows his movements, too, careful to let him sleep this time. Maybe he's too tired himself, or maybe he is growing less and less careful around Chuuya, but Chuuya isn't asleep just yet. He takes the hand lingering on his face and nuzzles it instead, half-hugging it.

Then he drifts off.

And Dazai has no other choice but to follow.

Chapter End Notes

Do not relax just yet because this is not the last we see of the sheep 🐑

Next chapter we have:
- a realization
- a (few) missed phone call(s)
- and benefits

Chapter 20: Exit Wound

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chuuya's alarm clock is the heavy pounding in the back of his skull. He tries to blink, fails because it's like trying to peel hardened glue off his face with bare fingers. So he rolls over with a low groan, fighting the instinct to sink back into the murky darkness he's been swimming in up until now.

When he finally manages to pry his eyes open, the ceiling stares flatly back at him

He lets out a breath. Then his brows tug into a frown as the clammy sweat that clings to his chest announces itself with an uncomfortable flash of heat, making him kick the sheets aside and sit up in bed, a whirlpool of nausea and dread bubble to the surface inside of him.

Something happened, Chuuya thinks. *Something really shitty.* He can't remember what exactly yet, feeling like he is chasing the fading remnants of a nightmare, except that it's there, on the edge of his vision, and –

He stiffens and the oxygen in his lungs turns to ash as the memories rush in.

The empty dorms of the sheep. Yuan staring at him with thick tears in her eyes. *It was your fault.*

That wasn't a horrible dream that his brain made up. That was all real. That happened. His friends left. Yuan left. They all… left.

With a shaky breath, he slips out of bed and power-walks to the bathroom where he sinks to his knees and empties the entire content of his stomach, his abdomen seizing and cramping like it's possessed until there is nothing left but acid.

Chuuya's fingers still shake with dizziness when he pushes himself to his feet, but there isn't anything to retch out anymore. There isn't anything that can be done about what happened either.

The sheep left. Not only that, they ran away *from* him. And as much as that knowledge slices through his soul, he can't blame them because

Yuan was *right*. He should have told them that they were free to leave the same night Dazai gave him that choice. A good leader would have.

But he didn't.

And now they are gone, and he is bound to a lifetime in the mafia by himself.

It could have been worse, Chuuya tells himself, gripping the sink. The sheep could have been killed for deserting. The port mafia could have been a hundred times more horrible than it has been so far. Dazai could have been a wrinkly, old man.

That name—Dazai's name—triggers another flash-series of memories though.

Dazai flicking a glass with his finger.

Chuuya muttering something and leaning closer to him and touching his thigh and…

That bar where Chuuya decided to drown his sorrows. Dazai picked him up from there, didn't he? The memories are flimsy. Riddled with holes. Odd bits of pieces of conversations and images that aren't big or long enough to connect into a full picture.

… and what?

What did Chuuya do?

He blinks furiously, then squeezes his eyes shut and presses his palm against his face as if that will somehow restore the memories that alcohol stole from him. But nothing happens.

All he has is a gaping hole in his brain, an even bigger tear in his heart, and an anxious knot in his stomach that tugs at him every time he tries to remember.

Letting his hand drop, Chuuya curses himself and swears to never touch alcohol again. At least not around Dazai. And Chuuya is fairly sure he will be around him a lot in the future now that there is nothing stopping him anymore from solving the Dazai-shaped puzzle.

It's this thought that accompanies him inside the shower. *It could have been worse.* Just like the downpour of hot water pelting against his skin, the words bombard his mind over and over. *It could have been so*

much worse. That's the only thing he has to remember going forward from now on.

By the time he steps out and dries himself off, the drinking-induced nausea has ebbed away, leaving behind an empty stomach that's growling with hunger. He's doing inventory of the pathetic contents of his fridge when the sound of his doorbell pierces the oppressive silence in his apartment.

Chuuya pauses but doesn't make any attempts to move from his spot.

Because if that's Dazai out there, it's too damn early and bright in here to face the consequences of last night's mistakes. Especially when Chuuya still doesn't know what the hell happened – or rather, what he did. What he said.

Then again, if it was Dazai, he would not have the decency to wait. He would simply barge in.

It rings a second time, so Chuuya sighs, closes the refrigerator and drags his feet to the corridor that's too damn big for just the one person that lives here. It's not Dazai on the other side, but just as disturbing: a young black-clad mafioso tugging his mouth into a nervous smile as he clutches the edges of a trolley. "Room service," he announces, though he doesn't sound convinced of that either. "May I come in, sir?"

"Um, sure." Chuuya steps aside to let him in. "I didn't order anything though. Are you at the right place?" He had no idea that ordering room service was a possibility. He has flimsy memories of that mafioso that escorted him to his apartment, Higuchi was her name, mentioning that he was free to ask someone to do his groceries, and yes, part of the tower is a hotel, but this seems excessive. And a reminder that he must have barely even scraped the surface of all the benefits that come with being in the port mafia.

An *executive* in the port mafia, another part of him corrects.

That little upgrade almost slipped through the cracks given how turbulent and eventful the last few days were.

"Positive, sir," the mafioso confirms with a firm nod. "The request came from the boss himself."

Well, that answers a lot of questions.

Chuuya accepts this with a dry, “All right. Thanks.”

The guy gives him a short bow. “Do you need anything else, sir?”

“Nah, I’m good.”

And with that, the man scurries away.

Chuuya suspiciously eyes the trolley for a long moment. He doubts anyone would manage to slip past the port mafia’s tight security controls and attempt to poison him, but old habits die hard.

In the end, hunger overpowers suspicion, so he takes off the lid and is greeted with the thick smell of freshly-prepared miso soup, tamagoyaki, tofu, rice, pickled vegetables, and a plate of thick, puffy pancakes. Literally everything that the heart, or the stomach, of someone with a throbbing hangover desires.

He sits down at the table overlooking the waking city outside and has his first of many, many more breakfasts truly belonging to the mafia.

It’s delicious.

Afterwards, he digs out the folder on the gem business that he left in the living room before the trip to Osaka and gets to work. Because if he is going to stay here, then he might as well earn his executive title. And having something to focus on will be good, will keep his mind off things.

It still takes him an excruciating amount of effort to decipher what he reads and piece it into something coherent in his head. Even though he could ask Dazai for help, or at least for a continuation of their literacy lessons, the idea makes his stomach cramp up even more than the documents do. He just can’t shake this feeling in his chest that he not only acted like a drunk imbecile last night but that he was wrong about things. About a lot of things that he doesn’t want to think about right now.

Luckily for Chuuya, Dazai isn’t the only one with the ability to read and write.

An hour later, there are six of his grunts spread out all over his apartment, some of them on the couch, on the floor, in the kitchen and others across from him at the table. Six instead of only five because Karma asked whether his friend Kita could come along, one of the young guards that Ace used to have stationed on his ship.

Now that his future here is fixed, Chuuya needs an actual plan for the rest of the people that came from Ace's lair of horrors – his little army of *misfits,* as Dazai so lovingly calls them. But he's already got a few ideas.

As for the gem business, so far it has been a chain of hierarchies and passing-downs. Smugglers transport stolen or illegally obtained jewels into the port, bring them to concessions so pawnshops can buy them, and then skilled manufacturers cut all of their previous ties so their origins are unknown, giving them a second chance of life so to speak. The new gems are formally appraised by someone from the port mafia who eventually distributes them and brings them back into circulation until they can be sold at the front of top-notch jewelry stores.

Meaning that the port mafia's involvement usually started with the pawnshops, everything before that was handled by other criminals looking to make some money in this business. While it's been proven effective, Chuuya wants to go about it somewhat differently: by controlling the entire process from the very beginning.

Establish connections with one or two reliable, trustworthy smugglers, hire a pawn shop to work for them instead of selling to them, then continue as previously. It would create a more stable circulation and better money.

That's the conclusion Chuuya comes to when he's picking at the Chinese take-out that Karma practically shoved under his nose at the end of the day. He sends his subordinates home so they can get enough rest for tomorrow—a day that will be packed with meetings.

Even though all that he did today was exercise his brain, he falls into bed like a corpse, still feeling the straining consequences of too much wine and bad decisions. He's making himself comfortable when his phone lights up, the familiar characters of Dazai's name appearing on the screen.

He doesn't pick up. He lets it lull him to sleep instead.

***

The next morning, he spends a good ten minutes staring at his phone, wondering why Dazai called and whether he should make the trip to the floor above. If it had been important though, Chuuya would have never gotten a full night's sleep – which he did. Dazai would have harassed him out of bed a long time ago.

Which means that it wasn't anything important. Probably just Dazai being Dazai. Looking to waste his time with something other than doing his own damn job. Or maybe looking for a chance to mock Chuuya for all the things he must have said when he was drunk.

As Chuuya already said: not important.

Same as yesterday, he throws himself face-first into work. Calling numbers of people in this type of business or people who might know those other people to arrange meetings. He is on his way down to the lobby to meet his subordinates, leaning against the wall of the elevator with a foot propped up when the doors slide open to let in two young women. Chuuya's eyes flicker up long enough to see Dazai on the same floor, talking to Hirotsu. The crowd quickly disperses, especially in his presence, and Chuuya sees him smile and nod, deeply immersed in whatever conversation he is having, only for his one eye to slide side-ways as if sensing that Chuuya is looking.

What was it that Dazai called him once? *A spider on the ceiling.*

Their eyes meet even though there are two other Mafiosi half-blocking Chuuya in the back of the elevator. His feet itch to push away from the wall, but the doors glide shut before he can even let out the lungful of air in his chest, and they resume their ride to the bottom.

It's then that he remembers again.

The face that Dazai made when Chuuya asked, *begged* him, to make him feel better and the answer that he got was a soft but undeniable *no.* An expression that was so tender that it was almost pitying. And now that the scene plays out in front of Chuuya's eyes again he understands why.

Dazai didn't want him. Didn't want *this* – whatever it is that Chuuya cooked up in his head over the last few weeks. Sure, Dazai acted like it, but his impressive acting skills shouldn't come as a surprise anymore, especially to Chuuya.

That realization leaves him surprisingly unresponsive, just the hint of a bittersweet aftertaste on his mouth.

It takes him an hour to get rid of it again.

He spends the rest of his dreary morning driving around Yokohama and talking business with smugglers and mafia-affiliated dock employees, strategizing to establish a safe, profitable way to transport

gems as he goes. The growling pit in his stomach reminds him to eat lunch, so he grabs a bite from a sushi shop near the docks and finds himself a nice, high rooftop that grants him a spectacular view over all of Yokohama.

He used to do this all the time back then. With the sheep.

Usually, Yuan would accompany him because Shirase refused to let Chuuya carry him, no matter how many times he offered to take him on his back, and they would watch the sun set from above where nothing could touch them, higher than everyone else in the city, sharing cigarettes, sipping cheap beer, and talking about boys and girls and tomorrows. For a while it was Luca up there with him, sharing more than just cigarettes. And sometimes Chuuya went up alone, tired, frustrated, needing a moment to breathe without the pressure of responsibility weighing him down.

It's the change of perspective that always gets him.

Everything seems so small from so high above. So silly and unimportant in the grand scheme of things. Seeing the forest for the trees.

Tipping his body forward, Chuuya takes in the winding roads, always crowded and busy no matter the time of day, the different districts, buildings, and shops, the million lives all going through the same cycle of pain and joy and betrayal and love.

He tries to see the full picture. Of him. Of his place in this horrible, beautiful life.

He is not sure what it is that stares back at him.

***

Later that day, he finds his team a board room at the base, a place to bounce ideas off each other and visualize them.

They have several smugglers in their sights that they now need to choose from. Most pawnshops that the port mafia worked with in the past are already used to doing business with them, so it’s only a matter of renegotiating contracts. As for the jewelry stores, Chuuya plans to take over the core foundation in the city and monopolize the market with the profit that they should make with the changes.

It is as much sitting around and thinking as it is dealing with people,

the occasional insult and even brawl breaking out here and there. Chuuya prefers the latter, finding it much easier to get shit done instead of just theorizing about it. But he has spent too much time with Dazai to make the mistake of undermining the importance of strategy and logistics. It's part of the process.

Speaking of Dazai, there is another call that Chuuya *accidentally* turns a deaf ear to.

And maybe a third one as well.

Fine, okay, he sees it ringing, sees Dazai's name light up his screen, and makes the conscious decision to ignore it, forcing his gaze back to his team members instead.

It's just…

The sheep left. They are not coming back.

And Dazai was the one thing that made leaving so hard in the first place. His myriad of secrets, all that warped knowledge in his head, and whatever else it is that made him so interested in Chuuya in the first place. Sure it was that, but it was the other thing too.

The thing that drove Chuuya to kiss him in his office that day. To do it again in Osaka even though there were probably other ways to go about switching a baggie of drugs. To hold his hand during the entire flight home, fall asleep to the sound of his voice telling him stories about Natsume-sensei, and wake up with his head resting against his shoulder. And to throw himself at Dazai like a cat in heat while inebriated.

Chuuya is not naïve enough to call something like that love. It sounds wrong, and it is wrong, not because he is in denial but because he is looking at facts here. Infatuation? Sure. Physical attraction? Definitely. Some kind of bond? Yeah, maybe. Just not anything as grand and yet as redundant as love or whatever people might call it.

And all of that would be fine and well. There is no plausible reason to deny himself of giving in to this physical attraction because the sheep are gone and there is no one left to disappoint anymore. Except for the fact that Dazai clearly does not feel the same.

If there is anything that he remembers about that night now, it's that epiphany. Dazai had a thousand chances. Chuuya give him a thousand chances, even asked Dazai to take one, to do something, anything.

And Dazai didn't.

It's not the end of the world. Nothing tragic or heartbreaking. Chuuya sure as hell has more important things to worry about than whether Dazai wants to fuck him or not.

And if it means that Dazai softcore-manipulated him into getting attached by using himself as bait, then that's just the way it is too. If anything, Chuuya is more annoyed that it *worked.*

But it's not a big deal.

All he wants is to lick his wounds in private, preferably without Dazai sensing blood and digging his claws into them even more.

However, his subordinates seem to think otherwise. Karma and Kita volunteered to finish up the necessary paperwork with Chuuya even after he sent the rest away, and as grateful as he is for their work spirit, it's not much use to him when Karma's eyes flutter to Chuuya's phone and widen more and more the longer he ignores the incoming call until he eventually explodes in the middle of Chuuya's sentence:

"Aren't you going to take that call?!"

"Karma, focus," he snaps instead of responding.

"I'm sorry, Nakahara-san!" But..." Karma's voice lowers to a dramatic whisper. "…. That's the *boss* calling you. You can't just ignore that."

Next to him, Kita's expression twists into an equally exaggerated wince. "Aren't you scared of getting your head blown off? The man was *terrifying."*

Grabbing his phone, Chuuya pushes the button to decline the call before shooting both of them a blasé stare. "I just did." Then he slides the phone into his back pocket, so it won't cause any more disruptions. "I'm doing my job here, guys, and to do that, I need you two and everyone else to focus on the task at hand, which isn't a call, no matter who it's from, or protocols, or rules, but *this* ." His gloved index finger jabs against the whiteboard. "This is our job today. An important job that will bring in huge piles of money, and since that is what it's all about here, we have to do it properly. We have to focus on this and only this. Not on some damn phone call that is none of your business anyway. So you better keep your eyes on the documents or on me from now on, got it?"

Perhaps he was not clear enough because both boys stare straight past him.

“What about what I just said did you not understand?” Chuuya’s glare deepens when they don’t even pretend to listen. “Am I talking to a fucking wall here?”

Face frozen in an expression of dread and horror, Karma makes a squeaking noise in the back of his throat.

Chuuya cups his ear with his hand. “Sorry, what was that?”

“Nakahara-san –”

“Subordinates, hm?” a third voice suddenly says behind him. “You’ve got to teach them properly if you don’t want them disobeying you.”

Chuuya’s eyes fall closed in time with the sag of his chest, mouth pressing together to suppress a frustrated snarl.

Of course, Dazai has managed to slither inside the room without his knowledge.

Of fucking course.

Chuuya slowly turns around and comes face to face with Dazai’s lazy smile, growing even wider as he saunters towards him and –

“What the hell are you doing?” he means to hiss out when Dazai shamelessly reaches around him and… slides his hands into the back pockets of his pants, though it comes out as a pathetic rasp, the sudden proximity cutting through his vocal cords like razor blades.

The answer comes in the form of Dazai stealing his phone – after his fingers take their sweet time to linger on Chuuya’s ass. “So your phone *is* working,” Dazai assesses as he unlocks it and *guesses his password on the first try* with a bored glance before dragging his eye to Chuuya’s face instead. “I’d have preferred if it didn’t, Chuuya.”

Chuuya wants to reply but he pauses when he sees Dazai look past him, a cruel shadow falling over his face. “Scram,” he tells Karma and Kita.

A moment later, the boys mutter their goodbyes and rush out of the room. The door bangs shut with an ultimate thud.

“So?” Dazai’s attention is back on him and apparently, he’s feeling like

posturing today, taking a step towards Chuuya, then another, practically crowding him against the desk behind him. “Is Chuuya avoiding me, or has he suffered an injury that makes his ass numb to vibrations?”

“You’ve made it a point to barge in if you actually need me,” Chuuya says looking up to meet his gaze after a few seconds to force air back into his poor lungs. The air here feels sticky. Clammy. Yet his words are cold in comparison. “So I figured it wasn’t important.”

Dazai rakes his eye over him – the unhappy scowl on his face, the collar around his neck, the black harness around his chest that he added to his outfit and the new leather gloves covering his hands. It locks on the flower pin, kept above his heart. “You should give it a few more weeks before trying to defy orders,” he murmurs, tugging at it. “At least let the rumor mill grow cold before acting like a little brat.”

“It was a call, not an *order*,” Chuuya growls out.

“If I call you, I want to speak to you. Sounds like an order to me.”

“So that’s what it’s going to be like from now on?” Gaze dropping, Chuuya uses one forearm to push the man out of the way as he slips out of the narrow space that he has been cornered in. “Now that I’m staying, you can treat me like shit?” he mutters, voice thicker than he expected it to be. He’s annoyed. Tired. Not hurt. “You’re a bastard. Just say what you need next time, and I’ll do it.”

“You know, some people would call ignoring someone’s calls treating them like shit,” he hears Dazai say behind him with a theatrical sigh. “But what do I know? I’m such a bastard after all.”

God. *Fine*.

“What did you come here for, Dazai?” Chuuya asks and spins back around to face him, this conversation rubbing him in all the wrong ways. “Because if it was just to lecture me about my place, then I was right. It wasn’t important.”

Dazai lifts his hand. There’s a shiny black card stuck between two fingers. “For this.”

“What’s that?”

As if trying to coax Chuuya closer himself, he doesn’t offer an answer.

Only silence.

But Chuuya's just as stubborn, staying a safe distance away and not budging.

Surprisingly enough, it's Dazai who gives in, exhaling loudly as he crosses the distance to slap the thing—a… bank card?—against his chest. "You're an executive. You needed a bigger bank account for your raise."

"I had a bank account?" Chuuya asks, blinking at the card in his hands. "Since when?"

"Since I made you one of course," Dazai tells him, slightly exasperated.

Well…

Now Chuuya feels a little bad.

"Thanks," he mumbles, managing to force out the words but not to lift his eyes to meet Dazai's.

"That's not everything."

Now Chuuya looks up, feeling himself grimace. "There's more?"

"I told you. You're an executive now. That comes with benefits."

"I've been an executive for a week now."

"And if I had given you more than a pin, you would have accused me of manipulating you into staying." The curve of Dazai's lips is a horrible parody of a smile. "Such is the nature of trying to please Chuuya. It's practically impossible."

Chuuya bites back an argumentative response, only crossing his arms as he shakes his head. "What else?"

"Come with me," Dazai says. "I'll show you."

It better not be something big.

Chuuya doesn't want presents.

He didn't even want to become an executive.

But he follows Dazai anyway. They cross the hallway that leads them to the elevator which, as is always the case when Dazai is around, appears in less than five seconds, empty too.

Chuuya has this theory that there is someone in the mafia whose sole job is to make sure that there's an elevator available for the boss. They're probably sitting in a dark, desolated room somewhere in the tower, monitoring surveillance footage to make sure that they won't miss anything.

Silence hangs between them on their ride to the twenty-seventh floor. It's not exactly tense, not awkward either, but it's *cold.* Colder than usual. Though Chuuya can't deny that he's just as responsible for it as Dazai, whose lack of teasing remarks and understanding words must be a punishment for ignoring him.

Chuuya is glad when the doors slide open, relieving the icy burn in his lungs with the sweet relief of oxygen. Dazai leads them down a peculiar passageway that's draped in a myriad of violet-shaded lights streaming in through the giant stained glass windows. Chuuya's pace stutters as his eyes wander over the sundry motifs depicted in front of him.

"Keep up, pipsqueak," he hears Dazai call ahead of him.

"I might not be the tallest person in the world," he mutters under his breath, jogging to catch up, "but I'm still ten times faster than you."

Dazai's gaze slides to him, silent and calculating, before he steers his eye forward again without another word. On any other day, Chuuya is sure he would have uttered what's on his mind right now. On any other day, this entire hike would be filled with curious questions and open-ended answers.

Their destination is a fine-looking door that Dazai holds open for Chuuya. Inside is an office. Large windows with a gorgeous view over the skyline, mellow evening sun-light dancing across the lush carpets that are draped over glossy wood floors, and a big expensive-looking desk with two chairs.

Chuuya turns to Dazai instead, cocking his head. "So what exactly are we doing here?"

"We," Dazai says, emphasizing the word, "are in your office."

Chuuya stares. "My office?"

“Your office. You’re an executive, remember?” As if he ever could when Dazai reminds him every three minutes. “You can’t possibly manage all your business from the apartment. It’s big, but it isn’t meant for work.”

Chuuya takes another look around, seeing the office in a different light now that he knows is his. It’s truly exquisite. The paintings that hang on the wall look classy. There’s even a fireplace. He trails his fingers over the shelf along the wall, imagining himself spending his days here.

Kouyou mentioned that the executive’s offices reside somewhere in the tower – she also mentioned that she barely uses hers, preferring to handle business from the brothel. But the truth is that Chuuya has never been to anyone’s aside from Dazai’s.

This office makes it all more real.

“How is that going, by the way?”

“Huh?” he hums, shooting Dazai a look since he hasn’t been listening.

“Business,” Dazai elaborates, taking a seat on the edge of the desk. “You’ve been busy?”

“You told me to take over the gem market, didn’t you? That’s what I’ve been doing.” Chuuya’s well aware that part of his job is to give Dazai exhaustive reports of what he’s been up to. He’s not sure why he’s so determined to defy him today, just that perhaps Dazai isn’t the only one dishing out punishments.

Dazai seems to think it’s funny, his eye falling to the ground as he smiles a silent smile. “You certainly have.” After a pause, he says, “We will continue your lessons soon. You shouldn’t neglect them even when the situation starts deteriorating.”

At first, Chuuya wants to tell him not to think too highly of himself since he hasn’t been neglecting anything, but the second part of the sentence is what catches his attention. “Is something happening?”

“I don’t know how much you remember about the night two days ago _”

“What about it?” he cuts in sharply.

“My, my, so impatient. I’m getting there.” Leaning back on his hands,

Dazai tips his gaze up to the ceiling with a blank stare. “The Bishop’s Staff killed one of our men.”

Images flicker in front of Chuuya’s eyes.

The bar, his hands on Dazai’s thighs. That phone call. The smoke of a cigarette filling his lungs as they strolled down a dark alley. Dazai, Dazai, Dazai. A corpse on the ground, and a lot of blood.

He didn’t forget any of it. He just didn’t remember until now either. Like his mind decided it wasn’t worth paying attention to.

Even though the reality is that it is.

“I remember that,” he murmurs before lifting his eyes to Dazai. “Was anyone caught?”

Dazai clicks his tongue. “No. In the grand scheme of things, it doesn’t matter who of them did it because they all think and move the same. They’re like a hive-mind. What bothers me is that we haven’t caught anyone before. I sent a few of my men to infiltrate them and all of them came back dead. It renders most of their information either useless or outdated.”

“You haven’t been able to catch a single one before?” Chuuya asks dubiously. Dazai Osamu struggling to figure out a strategy against an organization doesn’t sound too believable. “What makes them so special? They don’t even have ability-users.”

“They might.”

“Hah? Their entire cause revolves around being against abilities. Why the hell would they have them among their ranks then? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“No one ever said they cannot be hypocritical,” Dazai says with a matter-of-fact shrug. “Think about Christianity. They preach about loving thy neighbor, yet how many crusades were performed in the name of their god? How many people were shunned for their wrong beliefs? How much blood was spilled?”

Chuuya’s jaw locks. It’s a good point. It just sucks.

“However stupid their ideology and belief may be, their chess moves so far have been logical in comparison… until now, of course.”

“They attacked the port mafia,” Chuuya muses out loud. “How is that any different from when they crucified that man?” As far as he knows that heinous crime went without any retaliation – which is a crime in itself. The man was nailed to a post while he was alive. You can’t preach about peace and then perform inhuman acts like these.

“The difference is that they killed someone we sent to spy on them. As horrible as it sounds, it was an eye for an eye.”

“Hardly,” Chuuya says dryly, “but I get what you’re saying.”

Dazai nods, pleased. “This attack was unprompted. It might as well have been a declaration of war from their side.”

Angels are messengers of god.

“You said it was a message.”

“It was, and it has layers, but the act of killing someone of ours – who had nothing to do with them – was the basic gist of the entire thing. They’ve stayed out of our territories up until now, mostly targeting rogue ability users on the streets, criminals who don’t belong to anyone, other ability-driven organizations, those kinds of people. That’s changing now.”

“But you have a plan?”

“I’m working on it,” Dazai says and lifts his eyes to meet him.

It’s been a while since Chuuya felt his fingers itch as they do now. Months, probably, when he was still with the sheep and scheming plans to take down organizations that were threatening his friends. Back then the Bishop’s Staff was only mentioned in passing, always the religious freaks, but never a serious threat.

Itching for a good fight. For a purpose that will give him a reason to wake up and a reason to go to sleep at night. For something that will fill the hole that the sheep carved out of him when they left.

Working to take over the gem business has been a decent distraction, but Chuuya needs something bigger than that. Something that’s about more than just money and power.

He wants to be on the frontlines when the time comes. Judging by the sweltering gleam in Dazai’s eye as he looks at him, he already knows.

“You will get to bite,” he says. “Don’t worry, Chuuya.” Dazai pushes away from the desk but not without brushing his fingers over the glossy wood, his chest exhaling a sigh. “For now though, it’s less fighting and more strategizing, so you can go on as you did before. Train your grunts. Control the gem market. With an office now.”

Giving him the bank card and the office and catching up seem to be the only things Dazai wanted to see Chuuya for, already strolling towards the door. He pauses before leaving, though. “Oh, and there is an event that I’m invited to next week. I’ll need you as my bodyguard.” He grins, a smile full of sickly-sweet malice. “So you won’t get the stupid idea to *avoid* me again.”

Chuuya watches him leave without another word.

Chapter End Notes

> Your love and support mean the world to me and I appreciate every single kind word that you guys leave me ♥ Thank you so much!
>
> Next chapter we have:
> - an invitation
> - two idiots being ridiculous
> - and a confession

Chapter 21: Biological Imperative

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On Monday, three days after the sheep's disappearance, Chuuya receives a text from an anonymous number that says: *I found them.*

It takes him barely a minute to decipher the characters on his screen. Not only because he makes sure to keep up his lessons, with or without Dazai, but because of the symbol that's attached to it. A sheep.

His stare remains glued to his phone for a long time even though the images in his head go beyond this one short message. He wonders whether the sheep took back their old territory in Suribachi city, or whether they decided to stay low for now, gather their strength, and come up with a strategy before reclaiming what was once theirs. It's what he would have done. He wonders whether Yuan told them about the choice that Dazai had given Chuuya, or whether she came up with a lie to explain her decision to leave him behind as well.

He wonders.

It's a knock on the door of his office that makes him put down his phone. His own brave new world consists of training his subordinates, dealing with the excruciating amount of paperwork that comes with being an executive, a lot of caffeine, gems, smugglers, shop owners, and the occasional visit from other port mafia higher-ups like Albatross, who strolls inside with a pair of shades that are excessive inside a building and a grin that's too damn wide at this early time of day.

"I'm seething with jealousy every time I see the view, Chuuya-kun! How is it that you always get all the special things? What's your secret?"

Chuuya doesn't bother to lift his eyes from the stack of files in front of him. "You've been in the mafia how long?"

"Six years, baby."

"And you don't have an office?" He's aware that Albatross isn't an executive but he's basically Dazai's right-hand man for everything.

Surely that should have earned him an office with a view by now?

“I’m always on the move, so I didn’t see the point in settling down in the tower somewhere.”

Now Chuuya looks up, if only to shoot the man a flat stare. “Then why are you complaining?”

“Well, just because I said I didn’t want one, doesn’t mean the boss actually had to listen to me! I’m sure it would come in handy for the ladies and the gentlemen,” his brows waggle suggestively, “if you know what I mean.”

“Do you have a boat for me,” Chuuya asks, ignoring his suggestive comment, “or not?”

Albatross grins even louder. “Who do you take me for? Of course I have a boat for you.”

Chuuya’s first shipment of gems is arriving next week. He found a handful of decent smugglers that he hired for the port mafia, but too many of them come with shitty equipment, so he turned to Albatross for help.

“Here.” He conjures up more documents from the inside of his vest and smacks them on Chuuya’s desk. “She will be ready at the docks by tomorrow night. The exact place’s in there. She’s a fine piece of ass if I do say so myself.”

“Thanks.”

“Hey, since we’re already bonding so well -” Chuuya wouldn’t describe normal work interactions as *bonding* but okay. “- we were wondering if you’d like to grab a drink with us one of these days?” Albatross nearly spills the half-empty mug of coffee on his desk on his quest to bend over and nudge Chuuya’s arm with his elbow. “Throw some darts, play billiards, listen to good music in fantastic company. Eh, how about it?”

Shifting in his seat, Chuuya pointedly shoves him out of his personal space again and furrows his brows. “Who is *we?”*

“Iceman, Piano Man, Lippmann, Doc, and yours truly.”

Most of them are, in fact, people he’s already met before. Iceman was the prick who beat him up on his first day in the port mafia. Piano

Man is an executive—Chuuya ran into him on his way here just yesterday. Lippmann sounds a lot like the name of the mafia representative who came to visit the sheep and strike a deal with them after Shirase's arrest.

"Have I met Doc?"

"He patched you up after Ace delivered you back all battered and bruised, but maybe you were too high on painkillers to remember."

How could he not?

"That's his name?" Chuuya scoffs. "I thought people called him Doc because he is a doc."

Stuffing his hands into the pockets of his baggy pants, Albatross shrugs. "All of us have different names from previous lives. Somehow, it's the nicknames that stuck though. So, sound good?"

Chuuya glances up to see an intense pair of eyes staring him down, his shades resting on his head for once. Something tells him they won't accept no from an answer.

The thing is, he doesn't feel like saying no in the first place.

A night to drink and relax sounds good.

"Tell me you're in."

"Fine," he mutters and dips his chin back to the stupid paperwork with a scowl. "Whatever. Don't make a big deal out of it."

However, Albatross has a habit of making a big deal out of *everything*. He could watch someone blow their nose and still find something to celebrate about it.

This is precisely what he does right now as well.

"Great! That's terrific, Chuuya-kun," he cheers on his way out of the office. "Best decision you'll have ever made! I promise you won't regret it! I'll text you the address and you just come around when you feel like it and - okay, okay, I'm leaving already before you change your mind."

Chuuya just rolls his eyes.

***

On Friday, he's striding down the hallway to Dazai's office.

Chuuya hasn't been up here for what feels like *ages.* Squinting, he tries to remember the last time. Not since the sheep, not since Osaka, not since…

The kiss.

He hasn't been here since he kissed Dazai.

With all the recent events, even that feels like it happened decades ago, even though it's barely been two weeks.

Today isn't about kissing though—and neither is any other day, for that matter—but about Dazai's ridiculous demand for Chuuya to be his bodyguard for an event. Needless to say, it will turn out to be some kind of secret mission that Dazai will only tell him about when they are already in the middle of it. Chuuya has been through this game before. Nothing is ever a mere *event* for that man.

The first thing that greets Chuuya after the guards let him inside is a cat, sitting patiently in front of the door like she has been expecting him to turn up for a while now.

"Jiji!" Chuuya says, delighted surprise spilling from his chest, and he's already squatting down to offer her his hand. She raises herself to her feet to headbutt him. "How have you been, pretty lady? Did you miss me? Aww, I missed you too, you sweet little thing. You're just so freaking cute, aren't you?"

He pets her until she gets bored of the attention and steals herself away, trotting away to sit down and lick her paws. Smiling to himself, Chuuya rises back to his feet and makes his way around the corner to get Dazai, who is just getting up from behind his desk, dusting off his shirt and sniffing suspiciously.

Chuuya's eyes narrow as the man's mouth curves into a beam. "Are you ready to go? Aw, Chuuya, don't look so serious. We're going out. We're doing something fun!"

Instead of a response, he makes a guess and reaches inside Dazai's coat pocket, blindly searching for something until he feels the smooth texture of a zippy bag. "Seriously," he mutters, dangling the coke between his fingers. "Is there ever a time when you're not high?"

"Ask nicely if you want some," Dazai says in a chiding tone and

promptly steals it back. “I don’t reward bad behavior with the finest product in the country.”

“I don’t want your fucking coke. What I want is for you to stop inhaling it like it’s nose spray.”

“And I want my calls to be picked up, but I guess we all have to live with things we can’t have, hm?”

Chuuya shoots him a dirty look before spinning on his heels and shoving his hands inside the pockets of his slacks—also new. They’re not that different from his other pairs aside from being more comfortable and fitting him even better. “One of these days I’ll cuff you to your bed, Dazai.”

“Oh?” Dazai hums. “Is that what you like in bed then?”

“What? I didn’t mean -” Chuuya holds back an embarrassed growl. “Not like *that*. So you’ll get a full night of sleep for once in your life.”

“I prefer other ways to help me fall asleep. Handcuffs don’t sound too comfortable.”

“Then why do you rely on coke to keep you standing?”

“I never said I use them.”

“Well, you should. I’d rather work with someone who can be sober.”

“Why do you think I am taking you to a horse race?”

“Hah?” There is no correlation between these things. “What does that have to do with anything?”

Yet as it goes with questions aimed at Dazai, Chuuya doesn’t receive an answer.

***

A car takes them to the racecourse. The IDs they are given at the entrance identify them as employees of one of the port mafia’s shell companies. What role Dazai’s playing tonight—not wearing any visible bandages but a face mask— and in consequence Chuuya, he has no idea, but he will probably find out eventually. When—or if—Dazai deems him worthy of an explanation. Because that is how things go with him.

The hostesses escort them to the clubhouse that is reserved for VIP guests only, an entire dining area with rows of buffets and bars inside and a view over the racecourse. As if that isn't enough already, they get an entire *room* just for the two of them—and the six mafia guards that stay outside… which begs the question of what the hell *Chuuya* is doing here.

"You don't like it?"

Chuuya drags his gaze away from the curtain wall and to Dazai, who tugs the mask off his face. His nose wrinkles. "I mean… it's fancy."

Resting his chin on his folded hands, Dazai lifts his brows. "But?"

"But you might as well watch the race from a TV at home if you're gonna sit that far away."

"The seats outside have the best view. You can see the entire race track instead of just parts of it."

"But it's so far away," Chuuya says again.

"And therefore doesn't smell like horse."

Chuuya rolls his eyes. "See? Might as well stay home. I don't see the point in paying all this money to watch from a distance. Rich people are weird."

Even though Dazai spent the entire conversation rebutting his arguments, his mouth curves into a smile that's so startlingly genuine that it's unnerving. Chuuya looks away, thankful when a waitress enters their private room, her short, black ponytail swinging in the air and her cheeks splotchy with color.

"Hi! My name is Haru, and I'll be taking care of you today," she introduces herself. "Can I get you, gentlemen, anything to drink?"

"Bring us a bottle of your best wine please," Dazai tells her with a curt nod.

When she directs her gaze to Chuuya, he strokes his chin in thought before meeting her gaze. It's friendly and open—so most likely unaware that the boss of the port mafia is sitting in front of her—but with an underlying base of respect that's necessary when working in places like these. "I'm not sure yet," he says. "Any suggestions?"

Her eyelids flutter before she curves her mouth into a breezy grin and leans down to hover her finger over the menu. “This is probably the go-to for everyone here, but this one?” Her eyes slide to Chuuya as her finger moves over the glossy menu paper. “The secret heartbreaker. Not many think of trying it out, but everyone who does ends up loving it.”

“Have you tried it?”

She leans back, lifting one shoulder. “I’ll tell you if you promise to keep it between us.”

Chuuya’s just about to open his mouth when Dazai pipes in out of nowhere. “I’ve tried it. Really not that special if you ask me.”

“Oh.” Haru’s smile wavers, but she quickly schools her expression into a polite disguise. “That’s totally understandable, sir. It, uh, obviously depends on personal taste.”

“I’ll take one anyways,” Chuuya says with a pointed look in the bastard’s direction before he flashes Haru a hearty smile. “Thank you so much.”

She nods, hastily leaving the room and shutting the door after herself.

“You’re an asshole,” Chuuya is the first to say.

“And you’re here to protect me,” Dazai retorts, flicking his fingers at him, “not to chat up waitresses.”

“I was just being *nice*.”

“Well, stop it then. You’re mafia, not a charity salesman.”

Chuuya’s fingers clasp together on the table. “And even if I *was* trying to chat her up, that’s none of your goddamn business.”

Because Dazai made his interest, or lack thereof, more than clear, and because Chuuya is not going to spend the rest of his time in the mafia being abstinent.

“It is, actually. You work for me, and that requires 100% of your attention. Not 99%, not 70%, not 50%, but 100%.”

“We’re the only two people in the room and there are six other Mafioso guarding you from the outside—and probably another ten that have blended into the crowd,” Chuuya points out brusquely.

“Who do you need protection from so badly? Me?”

Dazai juts out his chin, leans back in the seat, and shrugs lazily. “That’s your job to figure out, Chuuya.” Then he nudges his head towards the door. “She could have been a threat. Wouldn’t it be embarrassing to get the boss killed just because you were too busy making eyes at someone?”

“You’re so…!” He doesn’t even have the words to finish that sentence, so he ends it with a grunt instead. “This horse race sucks,” he mutters.

“*The horse races* haven’t even started.”

“They still suck. Didn’t you say you were invited here anyway?” Chuuya glares at the lack of people in this stupid room. “I don’t see anyone.”

For some reason that makes Dazai’s eyes twitch. Just for one second, but long enough for Chuuya to notice and get even more suspicious. “An invitation doesn’t mean we have to socialize.”

“Then I don’t see why you bothered going in the first place,” Chuuya says, stubbornly holding his gaze.

“Maybe if you stopped complaining for one second, you could relax enough to have some fun.” Something about the way those words roll off Dazai’s tongue triggers Chuuya’s fight reflex even more. Something about… those words.

Remember when you said that I need to have some fun? Lose some tension? I think you should help me do that.

The memory flashes in front of his eyes like a firecracker. Loud and violent. Up until now, he only remembered odd bits and pieces of that night. Not entire chunks of his embarrassing *requests*.

I’ll beg just this once.

Or worse.

Across from him, Dazai tilts his head. “Chuuya?”

“Yeah, whatever,” he mutters and rubs his face with one hand. “I’ll shut up.”

Before he robs himself of even more dignity than he already has.

For some insane reason that makes Dazai's expression waver and then, even worse, get up. Startled, Chuuya watches him walk around the table, then disappear out of his sight behind him, still so close though that it makes every single hair on his nape stand on edge in uncertain anticipation.

A moment later, Dazai's hands land on his shoulders. Softly digging in and kneading his flesh.

"What are you doing?" It's meant to be a loud demand but comes out as a pathetic rasp.

"I'm giving you a back rub," Dazai provides casually and illustrates his claim by locating all points of tension in Chuuya's back with bewildering ease. "We can watch the race from whatever place you wish. From here, from outside, from the bottom row of the stands, I don't care. And afterwards, we can go and pet the horses."

"Really?" Chuuya asks before he can stop himself.

It feels like Dazai's lips are only a breath away from his ear when he says, "Really."

It doesn't explain why Dazai is doing what he is doing with his shoulders. Doesn't explain why they are here in the first place either. But question marks and Dazai go hand in hand.

Chuuya manages to let out a breath deep enough to ease some of the frozen tension inside him, tentatively leaning into Dazai's hands. "Can we see the horses now too?"

"No. There's a lot of money riding on them, and the risk of someone meddling with their health so briefly before the race is too big."

"Oh. Do you have money riding on one too?"

Dazai snickers. "Of course I have. Who do you take me for, Chuuya?"

Chuuya doesn't get to grumble out his reply because the door swings open, the waitress from before strolling inside. She only falters for one single moment seeing them… like that, but it's enough, and slowly understanding starts to sink in.

Did Dazai really bother to get up, play nice and start massaging him just to make some kind of statement? To make a *claim?*

It's not only absurd, it's fucking childish too. Dazai had his chance. Fuck, he had a thousand chances, yet all he did was decline them over and over, only to act like a toddler who refuses to share the toy that *he* didn't want now.

Accepting his drink, Chuuya grins extra hard. The low moan he produces after taking a sip is probably over the top, but worth it when he feels Dazai's hands stiffen. "You were right," he tells Haru, making sure to drawl each word. "It's delicious. I couldn't have asked for a better opinion."

"I'm glad you think so, sir." Her eyes flit behind Chuuya and back to the tray in her hand. "The food will be ready in fifteen minutes… Is there anything else you want?"

"I want a taste too," Dazai declares. "Chuuya dear, would you mind?"

Chuuya holds the drink close to his chest, so the bastard won't have a chance to snatch it away. "I do mind. You have your own drink."

"But I want to try this one."

"I don't see how that's any of my concern."

"I can bring you the drink too," Haru offers hastily. "That's no problem at all, sir."

Dazai, however, ignores her. "It would be if you had a sliver of kindness in you. Come on, you can't even share a tiny sip?"

"No," Chuuya says and starts slurping harder and faster. "You could buy a thousand of those, yet for some reason, you insist on stealing *my stuff."*

"Stealing," Dazai scoffs. "That's a bit dramatic, no?"

"I think it's the perfectly appropriate amount of dramatic for your ridiculous behavior."

"*My* ridiculous behavior?"

"Did I fucking stutter?"

"I'm going to go and get you that drink," the waitress stammers out and spins around to leave.

"No, *stay*," Chuuya exclaims and wiggles out of Dazai's grasp to rise to

his feet. “Why don’t you join us?”

She stares back at him with wide, startled eyes. “Me?”

“Chuuya here has such an underdeveloped sense of humor,” Dazai butts in, forcing out a laugh that is everything but kind. “He thinks it’s funny making such jokes. You can leave.”

“I wasn’t joking,” Chuuya snaps.

“I assure you, he was.”

“Was not!”

“I-I’m sorry, but I *really* have to go now. Someone’s… someone’s calling me.” She practically sprints out of the room before they can even reply.

Chuuya’s chest falls with an aggravated breath, and he turns to Dazai to shoot him an accusing glower. “Great. You scared her off.”

“I think you have confused us both. You were the one to scare her off by making such indecent propositions.”

“I just asked if she wanted to hang out with us! There’s nothing indecent about that!”

“Right. Just a waitress hanging out with two mafia members. Totally normal.”

“It’s not like she knew that,” Chuuya mutters as he plucks at his stupid cuffs. “You’re acting like it’s impossible to talk to people outside of the mafia or below you. Get over yourself already. You’re not that special.”

“What I’m doing is making sure that no innocent civilians get put at risk *just so you can make a point.”*

“I wouldn’t have to make any points if you didn’t act like such a -” He gestures wildly at him. Even the way that Dazai cocks his head to the side is provocative. “Like such a… a….”

“I’m waiting.”

“Shut up! You know what I mean.”

“Actually, I don’t.”

Like a possessive freak regretting his past choices.

It's right there on the tip of his tongue. But uttering *these* words also means dealing with the other ones that come attached to it, and Chuuya's way too sober for that conversation right now.

So he ends up saying, "Get your own fucking drink" when he snatches his glass from the table and lifts the straw to his mouth, slurping aggressively while holding even more aggressive eye contact with the bastard.

Dazai watches him down the thing in one go before raising his eyes, clearly unimpressed with his theatrics. "You through yet?"

Chuuya only replies with a fierce but wordless glower before stalking over the door panel that leads to the stands outside. He almost sits down, then remembers something and stomps back inside to shoot Dazai a sheepish scowl. "You have to come too."

"And why is that?" Dazai sneers softly, still standing in the same place that Chuuya left him in.

"Because I'm your fucking bodyguard. Even when you piss me off."

To his surprise, Dazai doesn't fight him about it. He comes willingly.

The stands are already half-full, people milling around, fanning themselves with their programs, and enthusiastically discussing today's participants and their chances.

Craving the soothing effect of nicotine, Chuuya slides his hand into his pocket but comes up empty. The click next to him makes him glance to his side only for Dazai to show off that he is a dirty little thief on top of everything, his annoyed frown from earlier swapped for a self-obsessed smirk.

Scowling, Chuuya reaches for it but is met with a, "Nuh-uh. You'll get it if you share."

He glares.

Dazai pointedly smiles back at him.

" *Fine*." Grudgingly he slides out another cigarette from his pack and offers it to Dazai. Only then does the bastard lift the lighter to light it for him. Chuuya takes a long drag before exhaling the smoke with a

sigh. “Do you get a kick out of using everyone else’s things?”

Dazai sits close enough that he feels his huff of laughter. “Not everyone’s. That could end up badly for me.”

Right. The port mafia boss and the endless risk of being assassinated. Yet somehow, he never seems to be *genuinely* concerned about it. Only when it’s convenient for him.

“So it’s just me and the other handful of people that you occasionally talk to who get the honors.”

Dazai hums.

Leaning back with one elbow, Chuuya takes another drag. When he grows bored of the silence between them, he asks, “When does the first race start?”

“In about half an hour if I remember correctly.” It’s so redundant to add that because Dazai’s memory is infuriatingly sharp. “We can head to the Parade Ring, and view the horses if you want to?”

Chuuya puffs out both smoke and a huff. “Why are you asking me? I’m only here to make sure no one takes a shot at you.”

“I would feel safer if my bodyguard wasn’t grumpy enough to feel like killing me as well,” is the snappish reply.

Chuuya rolls his eyes. “I told you I’ll still do my fucking job. Don’t you worry about that, shitty Dazai.”

“Then let me put it another way: I would enjoy myself more if you also enjoyed yourself.”

“Right, because how I feel is so important to you.”

“Chuuya.” He hates the sound of Dazai uttering his name. Hates that he can that Dazai for some reason actually cares. “What is it that makes you believe I don’t?”

Most of all, he hates that Dazai is right. Because he does care. A lot. Chuuya might not understand why, but he can see the past months for what they were: a hundred tiny acts of selfless kindness. Dazai didn’t have to give him a choice to leave. He didn’t have to let the sheep’s betrayal go unpunished. He didn’t have to take care of Chuuya after Ace, after Osaka, after that night. He didn’t have to do anything, yet

he did.

And it's unfair to act otherwise, but Chuuya doesn't have the patience right now to explain that it's Dazai's warped timing of only ever wanting more from Chuuya when he can't have it that pisses him off and frankly, confuses him.

So he waves the question away like it's an annoying fly. "Let's just go to the Parade Ring."

He doesn't bother to look at Dazai's reaction, but he feels the gaze on the back of his skull drill all the way inside his brain as they make their way down the stands and into the heart of the crowd. Having made an earnest promise, Chuuya slows his pace down to match Dazai's so he can make sure that he stays safe and sound at all times.

"You know, I used to go to horse races with my father and my siblings all the time," Dazai tells him out of nowhere when they come to a halt in front of the fence that separates the people from the jockeys and their horses. "I guess it was a family tradition of sorts."

When he receives nothing but an indifferent hum in response, he shoots Chuuya's cheek a piercing stare as if sharing a crumb of personal information somehow makes him entitled to Chuuya's attention.

Well, it doesn't.

"My father even owned an entire equestrian club."

Even though that does make some questions pop up in Chuuya's mouth, like d *oes that mean that Dazai used to do horseback riding? Has he been a secret horse boy all this time? Does the port mafia still own any equestrian clubs and if yes, can Chuuya go sometimes?*– okay, a lot of questions – but he refuses to take the bait that is being dangled in front of him. Instead, he only gives Dazai a stale " *wow* " without returning his insistent gaze, and continues to lazily admire the majestic beasts trotting around the Parade Ring, their coats slick and shiny.

"I used to have my very own horse," Dazai continues with a melodramatic sigh. "His name was *Ponto.* I never used him for anything because there was this whole war going on and Ponto had an entire village taking care of him anyway, but every few years I stopped by to give him a carrot and some sugar."

What kind of name is *Ponto?*

And it's a shame to have such a beautiful creature in one's possession to not even appreciate it. A goddamn shame.

"I was thinking of getting myself a new horse. Maybe one of these will catch my eye."

That almost makes Chuuya's head turn to him. Almost.

"Or maybe I'll buy you a horse."

"Hah?" Chuuya's hands curl around the fence as he glares up at the man, so casually tossing out absurd ideas like these. "The hell would you do that for?!"

"You still haven't received the premium that comes with a promotion to an executive," Dazai tells him like it's something obvious. "I wasn't sure whether that title would be permanent, so I waited with that, as you surely can understand."

"You already gave me an office and an even bigger salary!"

Dazai shoots him a patronizing grin. "As an executive, you need an office, and the raise is simply a given. I'm talking about an additional *premium.* Piano Man, for example, received a 19th-century mansion in the Naka-ku ward when he made executive. Kouyou got a star named after her. Since you already have a penthouse, I figured your present should be of different nature."

Chuuya blinks furiously at him. "You can't be serious."

"Executives pay the steep price of utter loyalty and devotion to the mafia every day." The half-smile on Dazai's face is both bitter and sweet. "There has to be some kind of reward for that."

"Well, there's this thing called *too fucking much*," Chuuya mutters with a shake of his head. "I don't need any rewards. I've got enough as it is anyway. You bought me a damn dragon egg."

"That was my marriage present for you," Dazai casually retorts.

"An expensive and excessive one! Stop buying me things!"

Dazai innocently bats his lashes. "Are you saying I should give Kafka dearest away for adoption?"

“ *No*,” Chuuya blurts out. “That’s *not* what I said.”

“You said, and I quote, ‘*an expensive and excessive -*‘”

“Stop repeating my words.” He shoves Dazai in the chest, only enough to punch a scowl out of him. “I didn’t mean it like that. Kafka wasn’t unnecessary, but you -” his teeth clench in frustration as he flaps his arms about like he has to explain Dazai’s immature spending habits with pantomime. “- buying me all these expensive gifts without even batting an eyelash *is* not necessary. I never asked for that. I didn’t ask for any of it.”

Dazai’s eyes twinkle stubbornly. “It’s tradition, Chuuya. I can’t disrespect that.”

“If it’s about tradition, then buy me a popsicle and be done with it. Not a damn horse.”

“A popsicle,” Dazai echoes in a contemplative murmur, hand lifting to stroke his chin. “So Chuuya wants something to suck on instead of something to ride o—”

“You -!” The heat that ignites his face makes his words liquefy into useless goo. So he pointedly turns away and announces, “I am *done* talking to you about this.”

Stupid Dazai bumps his stupid shoulder against Chuuya, wearing an even stupider grin. “I’m just joking. Come on, Chu~ya. Can’t we have a little fun?” He all but shoves his stupid cheek against Chuuya’s face. “Isn’t that what our relationship is all about?”

Growling, he shoves Dazai away before dusting himself off. “Your idea of fun sucks. And the only thing our relationship is about is *work*.”

Dazai’s face turns more serious. “Is that so?” he asks, voice flat enough to be another one of his grand performances.

“Yes,” Chuuya replies, matching his tone, “it *is* so.”

“Then I fail to see why I should put your opinions on port mafia traditions into consideration and not reward you with a premium in the form of an *excruciatingly pricey -”* he spits these adjectives out like they are poison. “- *horse*. Or perhaps two of them. Or better yet: I will make you the owner of an entire equestrian club. Only that will come close to rewards the other executives got in value.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” Chuuya hisses, spinning back to him to raise his finger in warning as his eyes glower daggers at him.

“Watch me.” Holding his gaze, Dazai slides his hand into the pocket of his coat and retrieves his phone. He only breaks eye contact to look at his screen as he scrolls through it before he practically rams it against Chuuya’s face. “This is the number of the woman who runs the equestrian underworld business.” Then his thumb presses the call button. “Let’s give her a -”

Chuuya punches the phone out of the bastard’s hand and watches it fall to the dirty ground between them. After another nasty look in Dazai’s direction, he steps on it with the weight of a truck until he hears it crush into a thousand tiny pieces.

Then he meets Dazai’s deceptively calm stare. “You were saying?”

Except that his composure isn’t a ruse. His hand slides into his pocket yet again only to fish out *a second* phone, mouth curving into a sickly sweet smile. It’s not that unusual for a mafia boss—or for any member of the mafia to have more than one cell phone—but at this moment, it enrages Chuuya to no end. Which is why Dazai probably skips a step back with a condescending *tsk* before Chuuya can destroy this one as well. “*As I was saying,”* he murmurs, the flush on his cheeks matching his one blown pupil as if being a patronizing bastard turns him on. “Would you prefer one or two clubs? In Yokohama… or maybe in Tokyo?”

“You deranged, sick bastard,” Chuuya hisses back, fists shaking by his side. “I’ll sell those equestrian clubs and hire assassins to kill you instead.”

“Now that’s just uneconomical, Chuuya. Why hire someone when you’re perfectly capable of doing it yourself?”

“Because I don’t want to get my hands dirty touching shit like you.”

“My memories of a certain flight back to Yokohama seem to tell me otherwise.”

“I’ll -”

The sound of shrill bells cuts Chuuya’s threat short so that he ends up just sucking in a gulp of air. Meanwhile, Dazai preens like the interruption means he won the argument. Even though he didn’t. Not by far.

The bustling crowd around them starts dispersing to the stands, forcing Chuuya to automatically step closer to Dazai again and be his human shield even if the biggest threat to him right now is Chuuya's own temper, threatening to boil over at any moment.

"We should find ourselves a place to watch as well," Dazai says, his voice closer to his ear than he would prefer. "I know just the place where it smells the most like horse and the view is terrible. You will *love* it."

Chuuya only spares a dirty look in his direction before matching Dazai's steps on his way to get them to that place that he knows. And, well, he is not exactly wrong about it. The view is pretty much limited to the finish line of the race track unless you crane your neck up and try to look at the ginormous screens above; the distinct smell of horse loiters heavily in the air too. But what Dazai failed to mention is the infectious energy down here. Spectators whooping and whistling, enforcing the lively spirit of adrenaline and excitement around them.

So infectious that Chuuya forgets to scowl for a moment, too busy grinning because the old man next to him tries to offer him his beer in return for the cigarette that Chuuya gives him. At least until he notices Dazai looking at him from the corner of his vision. Then he makes sure to wipe any traces of joy off his face.

Unfortunately, it doesn't weaken Dazai's own smile. Small, barely there if you aren't trained to look for it but undeniably genuine and therefore unacceptable.

Chuuya isn't having fun. Definitely not because of *him*. And Dazai doesn't care about that either. Definitely not about him.

Chuuya lets the animated mood of the people around him sweep him up again as the Jockeys go into position in the starting blocks. As the crowd collectively holds their breath, he feels Dazai lean down to him. "So, who are you betting on?"

Chuuya has not the slightest clue about odds and bets when it comes to horse racing, never having been interested in any type of gambling before. Not only because he saw what it did to the poor bastards who became a little too obsessed with it, but because he preferred to earn his money the old-fashioned way: by relying on his body, his strength, whether that was the odd job here and there, or robbing a shop whose owner was a dickhead to the sheep. This here seems to be more of Dazai's area of expertise.

“If I tell you, will you try to buy the horse for me?” he asks dryly, arching his brows.

“That depends on whether your pick is worth buying,” Dazai tells him.

Annoying, as per usual, but good enough for Chuuya. He scans the betting boards displayed on the sides of the stands and picks out the horse that’s least likely to win. “I’m betting on *Helios*.”

“The underdog, huh? I can’t say that I’m surprised.”

“How convenient that I didn’t ask for your opinion then.”

He only hears Dazai huff out an amused laugh before the starting shot fires through the air, and the horses kick off the starting gates. Chuuya’s hands tense around the railing he’s been gripping without even noticing it, eyes automatically seeking out the underdog colt even though the decision to root for him was only made out of necessity and convenience.

But it’s enrapturing. Watching these beasts of earth and wind thunder towards a finish line in the distance, spurred on by the passionate cheers of the spectators, shouts of the trainers and the running commentary over the speakers, especially when *Helios*, the least favorited horse, overtakes three of his competitors in one single swoop.

“Holy shit,” Chuuya breathes out, arms flailing around until he finds something to clutch again. “The underdog is fucking *amazing*.” The fact that the *something* is actually very much Dazai’s arm only registers when Chuuya feels the faint flex of his muscles. His eyes dart to Dazai’s face, calm and collected, then back to the screen above them because the horses are nearing the last strip of the race track.

Helios outruns both the horses in fourth and third place and the crowd in the stands goes wild. So does Chuuya. The two forerunners are too far ahead of him, crossing the finish line first but Helios manages to be second, the other two finishing closely after.

Chuuya’s whole chest shivers from buzzing excitement. He turns to Dazai without even thinking about it. “Holy hell, did you see that? Helios actually came third! I only chose him because he was the least likely to win, I didn’t even think about it, but he made *third place!* Third, Dazai!”

“I saw,” Dazai says, granting him a pleased smile. “It was impressive.”

“It was amazing!”

“Chuuya has a good intuition.”

That’s debatable, but for now, he accepts the compliment. “That was fun,” he murmurs, staring out at the race track with a pair of dazed eyes.

The stands are bustling with noise, but between them, Chuuya and Dazai, it’s quiet. Chuuya’s gaze falls to his hand then, and he realizes that he never let go of Dazai’s arm. Clearing his throat, he unclenches his fingers and returns them to the railing. “That’s not the only race today, right?”

The idiot next to him snickers. “No, not by a long shot.”

“Okay,” he breathes out. “Good. That’s… good.”

Maybe this day will turn out to be somewhat salvageable after all.

The next few hours are okay. Maybe because watching the horse races is actually fun, or maybe because Dazai backs off for the time being, neither insisting on buying him any extravagant gifts nor claiming his territory like an untamed dog whenever Chuuya speaks to someone other than him. They try some of the food from the stalls, Dazai somehow even gets his hands on an actual popsicle for him—Chuuya bites into it instead of consuming it the traditional way, making sure to hold Dazai’s gaze as he does—and they check out the tearoom, the smoothie bar, and the future generation of racehorses: a bunch of foals staggering around and being painfully adorable.

It's already late into the afternoon when Chuuya notices a familiar face in the middle of the crowd.

“Hey,” he says, tugging at the sleeve of Dazai’s coat. “Isn’t that Oe Katsuo?” The owner of the casino chain almost went bankrupt because of his corrupted snowballing system but *didn’t* because the port mafia was so generous as to lend him a loan. With a hefty profit, of course.

“Hm? Ah, yes. Looks like it.”

“Should we say hello?” The moment Chuuya utters the question out loud, Oe’s eyes spot him. Oh well. “Nevermind, he already saw me.

Does he know who you are?"

The smile on Dazai's face is the paradigm of arrogant brilliance. "Is that silly, little fool important enough to be aware of such sensitive information? What do you think, Chuuya?"

"You could have just answered the question," Chuuya mutters under his breath because Oe Katsuo is heading straight towards them. "Who are you today then?"

"Just follow my lead."

"Nakahara-kun," Oe says when he stops in front of them, giving him a curt bow, then wordlessly urging the young woman next to him to do the same. "I'm very happy to see you here today.

"Hey. Likewise," Chuuya replies lamely.

"I'm Shuji," Dazai introduces himself then, mirroring all the pleasantries. "Nakahara-san's second."

Chuuya barely forces back a frown.

Second?

Of all the fake positions, Dazai is going to pretend to be *outranked* by him? That's… new.

Oe nods politely. "Oe Katsuo. That's Nami." He gestures toward the young woman next to him, ridiculously tall and her ink-black hair short but shiny. "My sister."

His sister. The ability user. According to Dazai, she has been a fugitive ever since a few people got hurt because of an accident that she was involved in. Pretty bold to bring her to such a public event as a horse race. Then again there must be a lot of underworld echelons here tonight considering Dazai thought it was worth coming.

"Nice to meet you," Chuuya says, shaking her hand. Nami's eyes, however, are glued to something else and it's not his face.

"My brother didn't tell me his co-workers were so… young," she remarks, eyeing Dazai like a piece of candy. "Pleasure to meet you. Really."

"I tried to, but it's not like you listen to me," Oe mutters under his breath. Nami waves him off with another smile that she aims at

Dazai.

“ *Co-workers* is a tad exaggerated,” Dazai drawls with a touch of superiority. “More like *business associates*.”

Oe grimaces slightly, especially as he glances at Chuuya. “Everyone at our company is extremely thankful for all that you’ve done for us.”

Chuuya bets they are.

The port mafia is the only reason Oe managed to evade a jail sentence. Chuuya will never forget the kick that he got out of the man and that rude partner of his begging him for a loan and a lawyer only a day after scamming the port mafia into a shitty deal. All according to Dazai’s plan of course.

He doesn’t let any of his gloating show now, schooling his expression into a relaxed smile and a shrug. “Some people deserve a second chance every now and then. And I see you’re using yours,” he glances around the race track, “wisely.”

“It’s our first time going out since forever, to be frank.”

“Hm, are you as busy as your brother then?” Dazai, the bastard, asks over the rim of his glass. “What is it that you do?”

Chuuya has to give it to Nami. If he didn’t already know she was a fugitive, he wouldn’t be able to tell that her breezy grin was a mask. “I’m a freelance writer.” Her head cocks to the side. “What about you?”

“Oh, you know, I let Nakahara-san here boss me around, take his calls, arrange his meetings, get rid of all his countless admirers. That kind of thing.”

Chuuya’s smile hardens to stone around his mouth. *What the hell is Dazai’s deal here?*

“Ah,” she says, nodding, gaze briefly scanning Chuuya from head to toe but returning back to her original object of desire. “Interesting. I’d love to hear more about it.”

“Heh, it’s not that interesting, I assure you.”

“I insist.”

Chuuya hates that he can pick out the tension in the air, thick and

crackling, and call him a hypocrite but he is about to tell Dazai that they should get going when Oe beats him to it.

“Would you mind if we joined you two? I was going to come to find someone from your team later anyway.”

Dazai’s head turns to Chuuya, waiting for an answer.

Put on the spot like that, Chuuya can only blink before saying, “Sure. Why not?”

“Yeah,” he hears Dazai mutter under his breath, “why not.”

The moment they agree, Nami’s eyes zero in on Dazai like a predator spotting their prey. Because Chuuya isn’t in the mood to watch him flirt or allow being flirted with for the rest of the day, he falls a step behind to turn his attention to Oe.

“So,” Chuuya says, “how’s the business?”

“Do you want the honest answer or the small talk version of it?”

Chuuya stifles a small snort. “I’ll take whatever.” As long as it keeps him distracted enough to not hear the soft murmur of Dazai’s voice a few feet ahead of them.

“It hasn’t been easy. Our clients and investors have been… let’s say, cautious after hearing about the scandal.” Katsuo grimaces. “But thanks to you, I still have a business to lead at all.”

“Thanks to the lenience of the boss,” Chuuya tells him because hearing thanks one time is enough. Anything more than that is overkill and, frankly, embarrassing.

“Of course. How is the boss, if I may ask?”

Ask him yourself since he is right there, Chuuya thinks dryly but keeps that specific revelation to himself. Dazai’s identity is not his secret to share. “He’s a busy man.”

“I imagine. Especially in the current political climate.”

A shrug. “Nothing that we can’t handle.”

“As expected by the port mafia,” Katsuo says in a quiet tone. “Can I ask you something else, Nakahara-kun?”

Nami suddenly lets out a loud laugh. Chuuya fights the urge to glance in their direction and channels his energy into his own conversation instead. “Sure,” he practically purrs, conjuring up the filthiest expression in his inventory, “what is it?”

Oe obviously returns his smile. “Is there anything you can tell me about your recruiting policy?”

Chuuya bumps his shoulder. “So you are looking to switch jobs after all.”

“Oh, I doubt I’m made for all the physical aspects of your profession. I’m asking for someone else.”

That much is obvious. He is asking for his sister. The only reason Chuuya is playing dumb is to have a reason to be more touchy than necessary. And to win himself some time because he actually has no idea about the port mafia’s recruiting policies and he would rather eat his own fist than ask Dazai for any information right now.

So he lies.

“It depends on who and what and what. More often than not, we come to recruit someone, rather than the other way around.”

“That makes sense,” Oe says in that pitiful *but I wish it were different* tone.

“Tell you what,” Chuuya suggests. “I can talk to one of the people who are responsible for that sort of thing, and you…” He pauses, letting the man dangle between his fingers for a few entertaining moments. “You grab me a drink and tell me who’s so interested in joining the port mafia.”

“That sounds quite agreeable to me.”

When Chuuya lifts his eyes, he isn’t surprised to find Dazai already looking at him. Not with that possessive look that he has no right to use. Not with much of anything, really. It’s one of those stares that you could try decrypting for hours and still come up empty, like trying to make out patterns in the surface of a still lake. Chuuya pointedly meets his gaze before returning his focus back to Oe, nudging his chin towards one of the passing waiters carrying a tray of drinks.

“Something non-alcoholic,” he says.

Oe sets off. It only takes a few seconds for Dazai to replace him by his side as he subtly leans against the fence next to him.

“Spare me your lecture. I’m keeping watch the entire time,” Chuuya mutters before Dazai can. “Just like the other six Mafiosi trailing us.”

Dazai snorts softly. “I wasn’t going to say anything, but I’m glad to hear that you’re so attentive.”

Annoyed, Chuuya pokes his tongue into his cheek, waiting for the other comment that is sure to follow.

“And so dutiful,” Dazai continues without sparing a glance in his direction. “Keeping Oe Katsuo entertained and happy like your life depends on it.”

And there it is.

“I guess I picked up a few things from spending so much time with you.” Chuuya tilts his gaze up to him until Dazai meets his eyes. “After all, you’re the best at making people want things to make them dance like monkeys for you, right?”

Dazai doesn’t break eye contact, but he doesn’t say anything either. No excuses, no replies, no apologies, or rebuttals. Just that bottomless depth in his eyes mirrors the feeling inside Chuuya’s chest when he stands still for a second too long. Then Dazai looks away, and Chuuya’s vision fills with Oe instead.

“Here you go, Nakahara-kun. Now how about a little stroll?”

Chuuya nods, about to push himself away from the fence when a hand snakes around his wrist and stops him. Not literally because mafia boss or not, he would have no trouble pushing Dazai away. It’s the smile, which curves around Dazai’s mouth, glinting like a switchblade when he directs it at Oe, that makes Chuuya pause.

“Not just yet,” Dazai chirps. “I need to have a private conversation with my colleague. Alone.”

Oe blinks, eyes darting between the two of them before he nods, and drags his sister away to give them some privacy.

Chuuya sucks in a deep breath of patience when Dazai tugs him even closer —

And the thin thread of patience snaps.

“Seriously?” it bursts out of him as he glares up at the bastard. “What’s your fucking problem?!”

Dazai opens his mouth, but Chuuya doesn’t let him utter the nonsense which is about to come out of it. “No, you know what, I don’t even want to hear it.” He stabs a finger into Dazai’s chest. “You don’t get to act like you own me. Yes, I’m not with the sheep anymore but with the port mafia, with *you,* and we both know that you played a part in it, but that doesn’t mean that you get to tug me around like I’m your fucking dog whenever you feel like it!” And apparently, Chuuya hasn’t been clear enough about his instructions because Dazai still tries to say something, so he literally shoves a hand over his mouth. “I said *shut the fuck up.* You had your chance, Dazai. I gave you a hundred chances to make your move, you didn’t take them, so accept the consequences and act like a fucking adult about it!”

Dazai’s fingers slide around his wrist again, though they move his arm a little lower so he can speak-and with an infuriating smile, at that. “Chuuya. Sweetheart. Can I please say my part?”

Chuuya’s teeth grit in frustration but he manages to hiss out a, “*What?!”*

“Do you want to know who invited me to this event?” he asks and then promptly answers it himself. “Me. I invited myself. I wanted to go and I wanted to take you with me because I thought you deserved a day off and some fun.”

Chuuya’s arm falls, his head flinching back slightly as his mind races in search of answers. “Huh?”

“You’re a raging workaholic that can’t unclench when he’s not busy with something, so I figured it’s best to let you believe that it’s work-related.” Dazai’s amused smile grows like a flower in the sun. As does Chuuya’s startled bewilderment. “And, well, you might have talked my ass off about wanting to pet a horse when you were drunk.” He shrugs innocently. “So I decided it’s about time that Yokohama had another horse race.”

But that -

That means…

Chuuya shakes his head. “But why?”

“Why, he asks,” Dazai says with a huff as he gently pushes him against the fence. “*Why not* is the right question here, Chuuya. Because you deserve a little fun every once in a while. Because things are about to get ugly and we should savor what little normality we can get while we still can. Because I wanted to, so I did.”

And then he plants both hands around Chuuya, caging him in from behind right here in public. Dazai’s voice when he speaks is dangerously close to his ear, making Chuuya’s abs clench in anticipation. “As for all the chances you so graciously gave me. Do you really believe that I would let you be drunk enough to forget everything the first time I fuck you?”

Chuuya’s not sure whether every single muscle inside his body freezes or melts. Probably both considering his brain short-circuits. “That’s why you said no?” he rasps out.

“Why else would I have possibly denied you?”

“I thought - I thought that…” Chuuya’s eyes squeeze shut. In hindsight, the conclusion he jumped to not only sounds hasty but pathetic. Jesus. “Thought all of it’d been just a tactic to get me to stay,” he admits breathlessly anyway.

“And you accepted it just like that?” Dazai questions, his tone strikingly grave compared to his playful drawl from before. “You didn’t even bother to give me crap for it?”

“Well.” Chuuya angrily clears his throat. “I figured it was my punishment for being dumb enough to fall for it.” He finally regains enough of his senses to spin around between Dazai’s arms, so he can at least look at him, and gauge whether this is just a new pile of bullshit lies or whether Dazai is for once in his goddamn life telling the truth. “So it wasn’t just a… tactic?”

Dazai’s voice is more heated than his small, somber smile. “Chuuya, you are way too selfless to let something as physical attraction influence your decisions. I’m honestly hurt that you even considered that.”

Chuuya makes a face. When he puts it like that, *sure,* but it wasn’t just… this. It was all the secrets, the odd, intimate connection between them, that reassuring acceptance that he only ever got from Dazai that all played their part as well.

“If you want me to help you *relax,”* the way Dazai pronounces that

word is nothing short of sinful, “then I’m happy to oblige. But not when you’re so drunk that you can’t think your way out of a paper bag.”

“I wasn’t *that* drunk…” Chuuya grumbles.

“I beg to differ.”

He swallows, starts worrying his lip before thinking better of it. “So what does that mean exactly?”

What he actually wants to ask is *can we cut this day short, no matter how oddly thoughtful and sweet the idea of it is and go back home and just… FUCK?* but a part of him craves to hear Dazai say it. *Needs* it. He is so good with words, after all.

Dazai meets his gaze without a single trace of shame in it. “It means that you were right. It means that I want you. In every way that you let me have you.” Chuuya’s heart starts slamming in his ears when Dazai leans down, down, down –

And pauses a breath shy of his mouth. “After you finish what you started with Oe dearest.“

The sudden reminder echoes through Chuuya’s head like a verbal slap.

And Dazai knows. Of course he does, openly drinking in Chuuya‘s grimaced scowl.

“That‘s unfair,“ Chuuya snaps with a pathetic whine in his voice. “I don’t –“ *I don’t want to,* he almost says but doesn’t because it would make him sound like a child. “ *Dazai.“*

„Life‘s not fair, sweetheart.”

„I‘ll say there‘s been an emergency.“ Chuuya nods to himself. „That something urgent came up. He‘ll —"

Curling a finger in his choker, Dazai tugs him against his chest. „No, no, no, we‘re not going to do that.“ And when that earns him the glare of the century, he tilts his head. „What‘s wrong, Chuuya? You were all too happy to flirt with him a few minutes ago.“

„Yeah, because I was bored and annoyed and wanted to get laid,“ Chuuya hisses, “and *you* wouldn‘t help me out.“

Dazai chuckles. „I would have if you had simply asked me. Sober.“

Chuuya levels another frustrated scowl at him. „You could have said something too, shitty bastard.“

„I was going to,“ Dazai returns, even though there is no heat behind his voice, not the angry kind anyway. „Today. But you were too busy throwing yourself at everyone else around you.“

„Well, now that we got that cleared out, let‘s do something about it! I’m sure the bathrooms here are good!“

But Dazai just keeps grinning like watching Chuuya suffer is the best thing that’s ever happened to him. „Go on. Your date is waiting for you. And from what I heard he has a new member for us.“ He leans down to Chuuya‘s ear in passing. „This time make sure he pays *double* the price that he owes us.“

Chapter End Notes

Hmmmm, I wonder what will happen next (´ ω`)

(A game, a climb, and a (trust) fall)

Chapter 22: The Waiting Game

Chapter Notes

Warnings: explicit sexual content (´ ω`)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

„This time make sure he pays *double* the price that he owes us.“

Then Dazai is gone. Casually sauntering towards Nami and stealing her away.

Chuuya has to force back a visible grimace as Oe takes that as his opening to come back.

“Is everything okay?”

Apparently, he isn’t successful at it. Not that Chuuya minds, really. “Depends on how things play out,” he lies, accepting the drink that Oe hands him. “I have received some troubling news, so my stay here will most likely be shorter than expected.” Not short enough though. “Let’s have that walk while I’m still here.”

“If you need to leave, that’s not a problem. We can talk another time. Maybe over –”

“No, no, right now’s totally fine,” Chuuya cuts in before the man can do something as atrocious as suggest meeting outside of work. God forbid. The fact that he pats Oe’s arm doesn’t help his case—but what else is he supposed to do when they pass Dazai and Nami? Not to at least try to get what little payback he can get? “I’m all yours, don’t you worry, Oe-san.”

Probably puzzled by the mixed signals, Katsuo blinks, then places a palm on Chuuya’s back. “All right. I have to admit that you’re not what I expected you to be, Nakahara-kun. Or what I’m used to from previous encounters with your, uh, colleagues.”

“Is that so,” Chuuya mutters. “I can’t imagine why.”

Oe lets out a quiet laugh—one that Chuuya is all too thankful for when it removes his hand from his back. “I mean no offense, of course, but the port mafia has a specific reputation. Not without reason either.”

“I guess the good thing about being on the other side of the law is that there’s no need for useless pleasantries.”

“That’s not how you come off,” Oe says and casts a glance towards him.

Chuuya only briefly meets his eyes before lifting his shoulder in a half-shrug, choosing to look away when he has to force out the following words out of his mouth. “Not to you.” Before Oe takes that as his cue to prolong this conversation, he makes a smooth turn around one of the many high tables and shoots the man a pointed stare. “As much as I enjoy chatting with you, there’s no need to butter me up. I already told you I would talk to someone about recruitment. Now all I need from you is the necessary information to make that favor reality.”

A sigh. “Believe it or not, but I said what I meant. You’ve been more generous to me than I expected. Thank you for that.”

Chuuya only nods.

“But you’re right. I guess I am slightly beating around the bush,” he admits, and pauses, clearing his throat. “The person I’m asking for is someone I care about very much. Yet also someone who’s incredibly stubborn.”

Even though Chuuya figured out who it was about an hour ago, he plays along and pretends to connect the dots just now. “It’s Nami, isn’t it?”

Oe’s eyes flutter closed. He gives him a nod before smiling. “So it’s brains and looks, I see.”

Chuuya ignores the patronizing compliment in favor of shrugging. “You mentioned that it’s been a while since she went out. There are only a few reasons why people would be in hiding.” He cocks his head. “So, what’d she do?”

“It’s not so much about what she did, than about who… or what she is.”

“Ah,” Chuuya says. “So she’s an ability user. I bet that partner of yours isn’t too happy about that.”

“Nezuko doesn’t KNOW about Nami, only that she’s *troubled* and that our family has cut all ties with her ever since she started acting out. I paid a lot of money to cover up the reason why the police have been

searching for her." His whole body slumps with a sigh as he rubs his forehead. "Although I guess it's about what she did too, or else she wouldn't be a fugitive in the first place."

Chuuya makes a noise in his throat. "Eh. You'd be surprised to find out how little you have to do wrong to be considered a criminal in the eyes of the authorities if you're an ability user."

"Right. I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize to me," he replies with a dry snort. "I am a criminal."

Oe nods again, clearly uncomfortable with this subject even though it's his family that they are talking about. "I've been trying to get Nami to change identities and start a new life in another city, or country even, ever since it happened, but she insists that it's not fair for her to lose all her friends and family just because of something that happened to her. When she, uh, wasn't able to control it very well."

It's not completely unreasonable.

Chuuya bets that the majority of accidents with ability users could be prevented if people were actually taught about them. If there was an honest conversation about the entire phenomenon. Instead, it's always treated as this dirty, shameful thing that's not to be discussed in public, sometimes not even with family or friends. There are barely even any institutions or organizations you can turn to for help. Of course, people end up accidentally hurting others or themselves. Anyone who suddenly got a rifle shoved into their hands would.

Chuuya raises one brow. "So you believe she'd be safer in the mafia?"

"More or less, yes. You guys would be able to protect her, right?"

As far as he knows they do offer protection services, so it's not impossible. But what Oe is asking for is something else.

"Sure, but that would mean you'd be *employing* us for her protection, which isn't exactly cheap," Chuuya tells him. "If Nami were to join it'd be harder for the law to touch her, sure, but don't make the mistake of assuming she'd instantly be safer. It's the mafia we're talking about. Not only that, but she'd have to work for us. That's not an easy job for people who want to join, even less for people who don't want to, and based on what you told me, it doesn't sound like Nami's dream life."

Oe Katsuo makes a face. Exhales. “I realize it’s not a perfect plan, but… what other options are there?” His voice turns lower. He nestles closer to Chuuya too. “She thinks she can play vigilante! One day her luck will run out though and she’ll get caught. And that would be the *good* alternative because a growing number of people think that all ability users, good or bad, need to be identified and controlled. Or worse.”

Chuuya draws back to create some much-needed distance between them. “If you think it’s the way to go, then do it. I’ll make sure she gets a fair chance to work for us. I’m just telling you upfront that it won’t be the solution to all your problems. For both of you.” Dazai’s last words to him echo through his head. Determined, Chuuya subtly lifts his jaw. “And it will be expensive.”

Oe swallows but what he says is, “I’ll pay whatever is necessary.”

Another fifteen minutes later Chuuya returns with Oe by his side and the promise of a sum so hefty that it makes his head spin. Just in time for the next race. Dazai’s eyes already spot him from afar, but he continues to chat with Nami until the two of them join them around their high table. His smile only grows when Oe Katsuo’s hand lands on Chuuya’s lower back again. He’d be annoyed if he wasn’t able to recognize the flash of predatory fangs underneath and those…

Those make Chuuya’s abs clench in both anticipation and impatience.

“So,” he says, “now that everything’s discussed, we should –”

“— find ourselves good seats to watch the race,” Dazai finishes in his stead even though it’s the opposite of what he was going to suggest. “That’s *such* a good idea, Nakahara-san.”

I think we should deal with the fictive problem that I came up with to have an excuse to leave as soon as possible.

I think we should go!

Not *stay*.

“You must have forgotten about the *thing* you alerted me to earlier,” Chuuya says as calmly as he can, staring him down with a piercing look. “It’s important that we deal with that first.”

“Thing?” Dazai echoes fake-obliviously. “What thing?”

“*The* thing. The one you told me about.”

Dazai’s eyes widen. “Ahhh… that thing.” Then he waves him away. “I already took care of it.”

Chuuya hears Oe make a hum next to him.

But he won’t let the bastard win that easy. “Did you though?” He tilts his head from one side to the other before leaning forward ever so slightly. “Because you have the habit of being a little…” He pauses, then smacks his lips together. “… sloppy. I wouldn’t want anyone to get in trouble just because you decided to be all about play and no work.”

“If Nakahara-san is so concerned with my work ethic, he is free to make sure I didn’t make any mistakes in my hurry to *play* .” With an aggravating smile on his face, Dazai fishes out his phone and slides it over the table. “Right here and now. In front of our acquaintances. Just tell me what you want to know, and I’ll explain how I handled it step by step. No problem.”

Although Chuuya didn’t expect anything less, he’s still annoyed to see the ease with which Dazai matches him blow for blow, grin for grin, and word for word. Every single display of impatience is punished with more time to wait.

The tension around the table is so thick that it drags Oe and Nami into it. And as much as Chuuya enjoys verbally trading blows with Dazai–because it is fun, even if he also wants to strangle Dazai at the same time–he doesn’t share it with anyone else. Call him greedy, selfish, maybe even possessive, but this is his and only his to revel in.

“No need,” he says and catapults Dazai’s phone across the lawn with the tip of his index finger and a sickly-sweet smile on top of it. “I’ll make sure you didn’t fuck up too much later.”

At last Dazai’s eyes narrow ever so slightly, especially the longer he stands there without going to look for his phone–the second one that will get trampled to death today. Just this one frown that Chuuya managed to steal from him alone makes him preen silently.

“Um,” Nami starts but gets shushed by her brother.

Refusing to look away first, Chuuya ignores everyone around him—everyone but Dazai.

What he failed to consider though, is that Dazai unfortunately has people. One of whom walks up to him a moment later and offers him his phone back. “I think this belongs to you, sir.”

“Thank you,” Dazai drawls without taking his eyes off Chuuya. “I’m so glad to know that there are still decent human beings on this planet.”

Having had enough, Chuuya rolls his eyes and ends their staring match. “Let’s go,” he mutters. “The show’s about to start.”

Ironically enough, they all find themselves back in the VIP stands, high above everyone else. Chuuya won’t deny that the view is objectively better: he can see the entire race track from start to finish, the huge screens show the jockeys and their horses from up close, and the stands aren’t as crowded as down there. But the atmosphere isn’t the same either. Maybe that’s because Chuuya ends up seated next to Oe since Dazai for some reason decided to sit one row above him—but also directly behind him as if to silently remind him of the rules of the game that they’re playing.

For a while it’s okay. The race begins, people start shouting and whooping and screaming, and Chuuya gets caught up in the adrenaline of it all.

Until he feels the curve of someone’s knee pressing against his spine.

Chuuya’s first instinct is to whirl around and tell the person to fuck off and cut it out. But when he goes to do exactly that, he is met with Dazai, pretending to be entranced by the race even though he is clearly busy being a teasing jackass. Torn between telling Dazai off and refusing to give him the satisfaction of having riled him up yet again, Chuuya swallows his words and turns his attention back to the main event.

And when Dazai’s knee presses forward again, he automatically pushes back. Hard enough to shove the bastard entirely back.

Yet Chuuya’s pleased smile is a fleeting thing. The next thing he knows is that Dazai’s knee falls away and suddenly there are two thighs bracketing him in.

“Nakahara-san,” Dazai’s voice in his ear makes the hair on his neck stand, “I don’t know about you, but I usually ask before snuggling up against someone’s…“ His voice turns even lower. “… you know, private parts.”

Chuuya's cheeks burn with boiling heat, eyes furiously darting around to see if anyone has noticed the peculiar position he has found himself in. "You fucking…" he starts in a hushed whisper before thinking better of it. Instead, he takes a deep breath, training his eyes on the race track the entire time, and curls his hand around Dazai's ankle. Then higher and higher until he can squeeze his lower thigh and –

Dazai's muscles twitch.

It's there and gone like lightning in the sky, but Chuuya feels it and digs his finger into Dazai's flesh for all that it's worth.

The response is immediate.

Just not what Chuuya would have liked.

His head gets yanked by his ponytail so unexpectedly and viciously that he isn't fast enough to hold back the small noise that slips out of his throat. A moment later, he sees Oe glance at him, with curiosity at first, then a concerned frown as his eyes flit from him to the bastard above him.

"Heh, whoopsie," Dazai says a moment later. "I thought I was grabbing my scarf. Turns out it was Nakahara-san's hair. Oh my."

Chuuya finally breaks out of the seat between his thighs with a tight-lipped scowl. He doesn't say anything though, not even to Oe when he repeatedly asks him whether he is feeling all right. "Excuse me for a moment," he says instead and gets up, only shooting Dazai a spare dirty look in passing.

He doesn't leave because he's actually hurt. Someone tugging at his hair isn't the best feeling in the world but it's hardly a reason to wave the white flag.

The reason he leaves is that he *knows* that Dazai can pretend to be the most patient man on the planet and drag it out forever, but the moment he ends up playing all by himself, he will get bored…

And come looking for Chuuya.

So instead of chasing the bastard like a cat, he decides to play the mouse instead.

Now that he is aware that this thing here isn't just a work event but that the visit to the race track has been arranged *for* him specifically–

or, well… if Chuuya is being honest, he is somewhat scared to ask what exactly was orchestrated by Dazai—he looks at the entire race track with a fresh set of eyes. And the peculiar details that he sees, from that specific brand of French wine that Chuuya gushed about a month ago being displayed everywhere to the instrumental music tracks that he sometimes plays when he's trying to focus during his literacy lessons playing from the speakers, is as frightening as it is… kind.

He snatches some finger food from the waiters that pass him, grimaces when Haru, the friendly waitress from earlier, hastily averts her gaze and walks in the opposite direction upon seeing him, and fights the urge to try out every cocktail and drink on the menu because Dazai apparently doesn't trust him to make any meaningful decisions when he is drunk.

He ends up on the highest floor of the clubhouse, surprised to find it completely empty save for a handful of staff members who give him polite nods in greeting but don't tell him to leave. As soon as he remembers that Dazai apparently had a hand in arranging a lot of things here, his surprise ebbs into resignation because *of course Dazai somehow guessed Chuuya would wind up here at some point during the day.*

Of fucking course.

Even though he is well aware of the bastard's nullification ability, he still sometimes wonders whether there is more to it. Maybe Dazai has two abilities. Maybe he nullifies and absorbs someone's thoughts. Or maybe it's just the kind of person that Dazai is.

The walls are decorated with expensive-looking floral paintings; a statue of a jockey lingers in the corner like some sort of immortalized creep. When Chuuya's eyes travel over an intimate area with a handful of tables, he notes that *all of them* are set with something akin to flustered relief. There is a piano here too, though no one's here to play it.

After he makes sure that nobody is watching him, he takes a seat at the piano, and pushes down on one key, wincing when it produces a loud, high-pitched noise that hurts his ears. Not that it stops him from pushing a second, a third, and a fourth one, subjecting the room and himself to the jarring screech his fingers create.

He gets up again to stroll deeper until he reaches the threshold that

leads to the balcony outside and the magnificent view that it offers over the entire racetrack and the landscape beyond. It might not be his favorite way of watching the races, but this, being high above everything else, is one of his favorite ways to think about life.

About the choices that led him to this moment.

It's only then, leaning against the railing, eyes fluttering shut as the soft evening breeze blows across his face like the day is kissing him goodbye, and taking a deep breath in, that he realizes that he forgot about the sheep for a few hours.

If Dazai's goal was to give him a day off from his life and a distraction, then he succeeded.

Not surprising considering it's Dazai that they're talking about but still.

Chuuya is not sure whether to lean into the urge of unbearable warmth that swirls through his stomach or push it down to the deepest pit of his soul where all his other secrets are buried.

Because Dazai is Dazai, so much more complex than just a name and a face to it. The head of the devil's nest that goes by the name port mafia, wielding power over an entire city, a thousand lives, and probably a billion more yen with such bewildering ease that Chuuya sometimes feels like the man was born into his role, sculpted to be this trailblazer, not with fingers but with knives. Master of the giant scheme court that is life. Holder of the pandora's box of secrets. A study in dark brilliance.

Yet at the same time, it's *Dazai.*

Just Dazai.

The man who grumbles under his breath when something doesn't go his way, who owns a tiny, black cat with big, green eyes, and who is afraid of heights. The man who reached out a hand to Chuuya over and over and never withdrew it no matter how many hissed insults and threats he received in return. *Never*, even when Chuuya's own friends did.

The conclusion that he comes to, or that comes to him, softly like powdery snowflakes settling on warm skin, is that he doesn't *have to* make any decisions about what to feel. Not for himself, and not for Dazai. Because what with the life ahead of them, together, in the

mafia, he will have more than enough time to do all the hard thinking later someday. Or maybe never at all.

For now, he can just be.

Indulge Dazai–and himself, if he's honest–and play their cat and mouse games. Get laid. Maybe eventually dare to breach the topic of his past. His identity. Though he isn't in a hurry to do that either right now, not when there is no need to. And… exist. Work. Eat. Watch horses thunder down the race tracks down below and *wait* for Dazai to find him.

He does eventually. He always does.

"There you are. I have been looking all over for you."

Hey, Chuuya. I've been waiting for you.

He blinks as the first words Dazai ever said to him echo through his head. Then Dazai settles next to him against the railing and Chuuya's attention gets dragged back to the here and the now. To the man himself. "Here I am. You found me."

"Or was it maybe you who found me?" Dazai snickers, smoldering gaze landing on Chuuya with a kaleidoscope of double-meanings swirling through his eyes. "Pretty clever of you to disarm me with the mirror effect."

Chuuya just shrugs before turning to face him. "Is this you laying down your arms?"

Dazai's eye twinkles back at him. "I don't know. Is it?"

Chuuya squints. Then he takes a step forward and the answer comes in the shape of Dazai's simultaneous step back. "Are you planning to drag it out for the rest of the night?" he snaps half-heartedly. "Or do you just want to hear me beg?" His eyes narrow. "Is that it?"

"Heh, well, no. Not *right now*," Dazai tells him. "And I'm not dragging it out for the rest of the night…" He sneaks a few glances to the side for some reason, making Chuuya warier. Only for a moment, then —

A booming, whistling sound explodes in the distance.

His head snaps to the source.

Fireworks.

“Just until now,” he hears Dazai murmur.

Another firework shoots into the sky before it bursts into a dozen scattered colorful lights.

Chuuya swallows, shooting the man next to him a wary glance. “Please tell me you didn’t…”

“Didn’t what?” Dazai’s brows raise in amusement. “Didn’t order fireworks just for you?”

Instead of an answer, Chuuya’s mouth pulls into a grimace.

Dazai forces him to agonize over the possibility for a few moments longer before his face breaks out into a wide grin. “Relax, Chuuya. I knew about them, but I’m not responsible for them. The Hanabi festival that’s happening somewhere over there is.”

“Oh.” His chest sags with a deep sigh of relief. “Good. *Good.* Because I’d have –”

“Yell at me all you want later,” Dazai cuts in, forcing him to face the sky with a hand on his neck, gentle despite its firm insistence. “But right now you’re missing all the good stuff.”

Lips pressing shut, Chuuya drags his gaze up to see more fireworks paint the sky in a myriad of bright colors. Some bigger, others smaller. Some louder, some quieter. All of them equally as beautiful though.

His shoulders finally manage to relax somewhat even if Dazai keeps his fingers exactly where they are. “So pretty,” Chuuya murmurs and rests his chin in one hand as he leans against the railing. “I used to mix up fireworks and shooting stars when I was younger. Always made wishes when I saw them.”

“What did you wish for?” Dazai asks, eyes crinkling as he glances at him.

“I’m not supposed to tell that to anyone,” Chuuya points out with a scandalized frown.

Dazai chuckles. “You said when you were younger. Surely those wishes have come true by now?”

Most of them were about the sheep. Yuan used to get sick a lot during winter, always coughing up her lungs for several months at a time, so

every time the sky lit up with fireworks, Chuuya raised his eyes to the spectacle and prayed for her to hold on, get better, a miraculous doctor to pop into their lives.

They never experienced any miracles, but Yuan always came through. Years later, she's still alive and healthy. *Or so he hopes.*

His smile falters a little. "I wished for a spiderman suit one time. Can't say that I ever got one."

"A spiderman suit," Dazai echoes. "Really?" Before he can get a reply he adds, "Who am I kidding. Of course you were into the whole superhero franchise what with that vigilante outfit you had going on before."

"It wasn't a vigilante outfit," Chuuya mutters. "It was a *decent* outfit. Very practical for the streets."

"Uh-uh."

"At least it was original and didn't lack any punch." He pointedly looks at Dazai's boring outfit. Always a two-piece suit and his black overcoat—expensive, sure, but not exactly unique. "Unlike something else."

Dazai's hand curls around his neck, all but forcing him to meet his smoldering smirk. "I only dress for the few people who see me, and based on empirical evidence, I think those people quite like it actually."

Chuuya shouldn't be so surprised to find his own insults being turned on their head, but he doesn't mind this time. Not really. Especially when it gives him the perfect opportunity to say, "Actually, I'd much rather see them off."

"Oh? Is that what the insults are for then?" Dazai rallies with a grin. "You're growing more wicked by the day. That's not very spiderman-y of you."

"I told you. That wish never came true."

"Why would you need a suit anyway when you had your ability?"

"I dunno," Chuuya kicks one foot against the ground, watching the people in the stands below, "guess I wanted to be important, and not just a street rat who happened to have the power to manipulate

gravity and…" He trails off, never sure what to call the other thing that life dealt him with.

A slumbering god? A nuclear bomb? The result of an experiment? A singularity?

A curse.

That's the most fitting one.

"Maybe there is a reason why it never came true. And that reason is," Dazai tugs at a strand of hair and waggles his eyebrows, "Chuuya's much more suited to play Mary Jane."

Chuuya elbows him, hard, rolling his eyes as he mutters, "Shut it. I can leap off buildings just like Spiderman. I'd like to see *you* do that."

"I'm sure I could." Dazai's voice gains an eerily somber note. "I would end up as a puddle on the ground but I *could* ."

"That's not the kind of leaping that I meant. And *don't* say that." Chuuya elbows him again.

"Ouch," Dazai rubs the spot on his arm, "I wasn't the one who wished to be spiderman anyway."

"Well, what did you wish for as a kid then?"

"Not much of anything, really."

"As if. Nothing? Not even a teeny tiny wish?"

Dazai's gaze flickers to him briefly, pensive, before he returns it to the spectacle in the sky. "The only time I ever made a wish as a kid, it was less of a wish and more of a promise. To myself." Despite the teasing, Chuuya didn't actually expect to get an answer, so he waits to see whether Dazai is willing to offer more without prying. "You see, I stumbled upon something, but I couldn't take it with me and had to leave it behind. So I made a wish." The smile on his face is nostalgic. "A hopeful promise, I guess. To find it again."

"Did you?" Chuuya tentatively asks after a beat.

Dazai hums. "I did."

"And was it worth it?"

“Everything I had hoped for,” Dazai murmurs, lifting his gaze to him, “and so much more.”

Chuuya lets out a sigh. It’s not jealousy, per se, nothing as petty as that, but a sickly sweet feeling of… longing of his own. To find all the things he has been looking for so long. To stop feeling like something is missing in him all the time. Like something is wrong, and he won’t ever be complete without it. “Must have been nice.”

The fireworks continue to rain across the sky like a sea of shooting stars.

“What would you wish for now?”

He looks at Dazai gazing up there, wearing a faraway expression that he can’t quite decipher because it’s so unfamiliar on his face—but not unfamiliar to Chuuya. Raw and open, like a traveler who got stuck on the wrong planet. *Homesick,* he realizes. *Dazai looks just as homesick as Chuuya sometimes feels inside.* But for what, or whom exactly, he doesn’t know. Only that apparently finding what he was looking for wasn’t enough, after all.

“Not telling you,” Chuuya eventually answers.

Dazai breathes out a small smile. “I’d wish to go out as beautiful as that.”

Chuuya’s stomach twists around itself, a flash of dread bolting through his blood. “Then I’d wish for you to come back so I could kick your ass for that,” he mutters, disguising the underlying concern in his voice as a huff before he turns away from the fireworks and tugs at Dazai’s arm, done with this make-belief conversation. “Come on, we’ve seen enough.”

Dazai stumbles after him with a snicker. “Someone’s in a hurry to get home ~”

“I’m not going to take this as an offense because I know you’re just as impatient,” he huffs, leading both of them past the piano and the tables and the buffet. “You’re just better at hiding it, is all.”

“So smart and clever. Do you not even wish for a bit of brain food as a reward?”

“Nope,” Chuuya says, and the prospect of getting laid is not the only thing keeping him from making use of all this glorious and free food.

His stomach is too full with pulsating heat to try to digest anything else.

Once the elevator doors slide shut and swallow them inside four walls, Chuuya considers pushing Dazai against one of them and doing something that he has been thinking of for the last few hours now. Or, let's be honest, the last few weeks. For a *while*.

He really considers it, especially as his hand subconsciously wanders to the tie that Dazai is wearing today, perfect for if he wanted to drag him down, and Dazai smirks back at him like every single thought that crosses Chuuya's mind is on display in flashing colors and big, bold letters.

But the building is only a few floors high, which means the doors will slide open again any time now, and Chuuya will be left high and dry *again*.

So he waits.

Not taking any steps back, but not closing the tiny stretch of the distance between them either.

"That's a rather surprising demonstration of patience there, Chuuya." It's Dazai who breaks the spell by forcing Chuuya back, back, back until his own spine hits the wall with a breathless inhale. "So good," he drawls, lifting his fingers to touch his jaw. "It's like I barely have to do anything."

It takes the self-discipline of a monk to force himself to stay still. Even more so to speak without giving Dazai the satisfaction of knowing all the terrible ways in which he affects him. "You're so fucking arrogant to think that everything I do is about you."

Apparently, the universe is on Dazai's side today because the doors slide open and save the man from having to come up with an even better counter. Or maybe it's not the universe but the fact that they are in an elevator. Elevators love Dazai. Much more than they love Chuuya.

Still, Chuuya sighs as Dazai nudges his arm to follow him, as pleased as ever. The noise that rules over the ground level breaks the charged heat that's built between them in the elevator like a wave of shockingly cold but relieving water. It's so crowded that keeping up with Dazai's stupid long legs becomes a challenge, though the same stupid long legs slow down a moment later and give Chuuya another

reason to walk through the world scatter-brained by placing a hand on his back.

On any other occasion, Chuuya would have taken more time to explore everything that this racing track has to offer, but right now, he only feels relief when a sleek black car rolls up to fetch them—with a healthy side dish of confusion.

“When did you have time to call the driver?” he mumbles as Dazai opens the door for him–even if, being his bodyguard and all, it should be the other way around.

Dazai slides in after him and winks, the gesture as corny as it is enamoring. “I have my ways.”

“Ah,” Chuuya presses out because it’s the only thing he can come up with now that they are alone… save for their driver but there is a partition that separates them and gives them privacy. Even though he wouldn’t mind doing it here—he has fooled around in cars before and he preferred that over dirty pub bathrooms or back alleys—he doubts Dazai would let it happen here.

The man in question shoots him a goofy smile and bumps his thigh against him.

Chuuya blinks.

“What?”

He clears his throat, then mutters, “nothing” before glancing out of the window, at his hands, the super interesting leather of his car seat, anywhere but that goofy expression on the man sitting next to him. Somehow he didn’t anticipate this to be so… awkward.

“So what are you into?” Dazai asks suddenly.

Chuuya’s eyes jump back to him. “Hah?”

“You know,” Dazai says, sneaking his fingers to his thigh and letting them dance over his knee. “Likes, dislikes, preferences, hard *no* s, what exactly is it that you want to *relax* .”

“Um,” he thinks out loud. “I guess an orgasm would be nice.”

Dazai stares at him.

Chuuya stares back.

“That’s…” Dazai cuts himself off, eyes narrowing for a moment before he turns his body more towards him. “Let’s try this a different way. Is there anything you don’t want to do?”

I don’t want to continue this conversation, he thinks to himself but doesn’t utter it. “You mean kinks?”

“Oh, so you do know what I’m talking about.”

“Shut up.” Chuuya rolls his eyes. “I just didn’t expect you to bring it up before we, y’know, get to it.”

“Why would I bring it up *afterwards?”*

“God, fine, okay.” He rubs his forehead as he considers what to tell Dazai. Or even what to think. It’s not like he doesn’t have specific things that he likes in bed, it’s just that it usually depends a lot on whom he is with. And how well he knows them. Because random hook-ups in public places with strangers that he has known for less than an hour don’t make the best opportunity to start exploring. “I’m pretty open,” is what he settles on in the end because it’s the truth–and because it’s easier to say than to explain. “And I usually don’t think much about it. I just… do.”

“Okay.”

Dazai sounds less mocking and more understanding than he expected, which makes Chuuya’s gaze flicker to him. “What about you?”

“Pain can be… a lot,” he says, not really looking at him. “So I would appreciate it if we talked about anything in that direction first.”

Chuuya’s first instinct is to say that he wasn’t about to start punching Dazai the first time they have sex but stops himself before the words tumble out. Because even though he wouldn’t call himself a violent person–sure, he *can* be violent and he isn’t *against* using violent means, but causing others intentional physical harm isn’t something he usually enjoys–he sometimes tends to be a bit rough. Not only in bed, but in everyday life too.

So he says, “okay” instead, and then: “Is there anything, in particular, you don’t want me to do?”

Dazai’s mouth curves into a breezy grin. “Neh, I doubt Chuuya would just start whipping me.”

“Yeah, that wasn’t really on my to-do list.”

“I know. It’s nothing too serious, I just wanted to mention it. Everything else is fine.”

“What about your hair?” Chuuya finds himself asking. For sheer research purposes obviously. “Is… hypothetically pulling it out of the question?”

Dazai’s thigh bumps against him again, the wicked gleam in his gaze deepening until Chuuya has to look away so as to not drown in it. “Hypothetical hair-pulling is fine with me.”

“With me too,” Chuuya blurts out. “Hair-pulling, I mean. But I don’t mind a, uh, more rough treatment either.” Squinting, he decides to be completely upfront. “Or scratch that ‘more.’ I don’t mind rough treatment at all.”

“Is that what you want then?” Dazai’s thigh goes bump, bump, bump, but stays pressed against him after the third time. “Rough and dirty?”

Painfully aware of the fact that they still have another half an hour to go before they’re home, Chuuya inhales and pulls his shoulder back before meeting Dazai’s eyes again. “Sounds good to me.”

Dazai nods. There is something that he wants to say, Chuuya can see the words on the tip of his tongue waiting to be let out, but he doesn’t just yet, apparently insistent on dragging out even *this*. “Only that, or are you open to trying out other things as well?”

Chuuya’s eyes narrow. “I told you I am.”

“But you also said –”

“Only because you asked me.” Chuuya impatiently rubs his knee. “I’m fine with whatever. Do your worst.”

“Chuuya.”

“Okay, do your *best*. I don’t care, Dazai! I need to get laid so badly that you could just jerk me off and it’d probably be the best orgasm in forever, okay?! I just need *something!”* Chuuya only hears his pathetically obvious desperation once it’s too late to take any of it back. Surprisingly enough though, telling Dazai, of all people, is not as dreadful as he thought it would be. It’s not embarrassing, even somewhat amusing until…

Until Chuuya sees the bastard drink in his little outburst with unabashed glee. “This isn’t funny,” he snaps and goes to slap his thigh–but corrects his course to punch the car seat instead. “I’m serious, Dazai. Stop enjoying this.”

“But I am enjoying it,” the idiot simpers, lowering his hand to squeeze his knee, “so much. In fact, this might be the best thing someone has ever told me.”

“Then your standards are despicably low,” Chuuya grumbles and tries to ignore the way Dazai’s cruel, skilled fingers make his whole thigh shudder. “This isn’t about you anyway. It’s about me really needing this. Or anything. Like yesterday.”

“Then just consider me happy to be Chuuya’s chosen method of releasing all that, hm, pent-up frustration.”

Chuuya huffs in reply, leaning back against the seat only for his breath to stock yet again as Dazai’s hand curves around his thigh and travels higher, enough to make his dick twitch in his pants but nothing more than that. Out of all the talents this man possesses, creating tension is probably his *worst* (best) one.

Dazai crosses his own legs before shooting Chuuya a playful grin. “Feeling tired?”

“No,” Chuuya lies dutifully.

He is somewhat tired. Not because of physical exertion but because of the adrenaline that has kept his heart at a constant rapid pace the entire day whether it was due to aggravation or impatient anticipation. Even now, settled back in a car, doing absolutely nothing, Dazai’s keeping him tense and alert.

But he is not about to admit that and give Dazai another reason to delay this any further.

“Maybe you should sleep first and –”

“You wouldn’t *dare.”*

Dazai barks out a laugh, a sound that’s both annoying, especially as he studies the tight fist that has curled around his wrist. “My, you’re so easy to rile up when you’re desperate, Chuuya. I was just joking.”

“Your humor sucks,” Chuuya mutters and uncurls his hand.

“So I’ve been told by many others before you. Hey, following up about before. Is getting slapped a no-no for you?”

At this point, Chuuya’s too far gone to be surprised by this question anymore. “Why, thinking about doing it?”

“Maybe.”

“Pervert.”

“Mmm, don’t tell me you’ve never fantasized about hurting me before.”

“Yeah, but not because it gets my dick wet. That’s just you.”

“Are you sure?” Dazai’s stupid face is full of half-lidded smiles when Chuuya sneaks a wary glance at him. “100% without a doubt certain?”

And well…

Maybe the idea has crossed his mind once or twice. But when dealing with someone like Dazai daily, that’s practically unavoidable. *Of course* Chuuya would like to knock him down a peg… or ten.

With a click of his tongue, he tears his eyes away to stare forward. “What does it matter? You said you don’t like pain, so I wouldn’t use that against you.”

“I said it can be too much, which doesn’t exclude it from ever happening, *and* just because I mentioned it, doesn’t mean you can’t tell me about it. Come on, I want to hear.”

“What you *want* is to tell *me* about what you’ve been fantasizing about,” Chuuya makes the spontaneous guess. “Or is that wrong?”

“I can want both.”

“But I only want one of these options.”

Dazai sighs melodramatically but indulges him. “To answer your question, yes. The idea of slapping you, one of the most powerful people I know, around does float my boat as the kids nowadays tend to say.”

Chuuya wants to huff and puff and accuse him of being a power-hungry freak but the reality is that he’s not much different. Dazai’s

physical prowess might not be on par with his own skills–even though Chuuya suspects that Dazai is much stronger than he lets on to have an edge in a fight if it ever comes to it–but he is powerful in all the other ways that matter, and they both know that brute strength isn't the only thing that counts. Far from it. And that makes Chuuya crave to take it all away, even if just for a few minutes. See him flail and flounder and struggle for his next breath…

When he looks at Dazai, he finds a mirror of himself there.

"You understand, don't you?"

"I… can see the appeal," he admits slowly. "And *fine.* whatever."

Dazai blinks at him. "Pardon me?"

"What you asked before." The idea of being slapped around by this bastard goes against everything he stands for as a person, but the idea of being slapped around by Dazai *in bed* makes his abs clench. Because he knows exactly what about it arouses Dazai, and *that* is oddly flattering.

"Ah." Dazai's hum is deceptively nonchalant. "I see."

"Don't let it get to your head."

"Me? Never."

And then his hand cups Chuuya's thigh again, somehow knowing all the right ways to touch him to drive him insane without even getting his clothes off.

Needless to say, the rest of the drive home is an agonizing exercise in patience.

Chuuya feels like he's flushed from top to bottom by the time the car pulls to a stop and the driver opens the door for them. Not with shame or embarrassment but with sizzling excitement.

The cool temperature of the underground parking garage feels like blessed heaven against his skin, at least until they are safely escorted to the private elevator that will take them straight to the upper floors and Dazai sends all of his goons away with an offhand flick of his fingers. He casually leans against the wall inside, Chuuya chooses to stay in front of him for some idiotic reason, and the doors slide shut and envelop them in heat and tension.

For the hundredth time today.

But it's fine. Only a few more minutes, at worst, until they are finally and completely alone. A few dozen floors until –

Chuuya's breath stills as he feels Dazai creep up behind him. Not saying anything, not even *touching* him, just being close enough to make his presence known across every particle of Chuuya's body. Then Dazai leans even closer until his mouth is hovering above his neck, and every single rational instinct leaves Chuuya's body.

"Dazai," he breathes out.

"Chuuya."

He can't even form enough coherent thoughts to complain about Dazai sniffing him like some dog because he is so *close* –

They are so close and it's still not enough.

It's never enough.

He spins around, mind running on autopilot, eyes finding Dazai's, the fire in them tamer than in Chuuya's but equally as frantic in reality. For a heartbeat, they stare at each other, everything around them coming to a standstill.

And suddenly, it's as if someone pops their bubble. They both move at the same time. Or maybe they don't, and someone is the first to breach the distance and someone is slower, but at that moment, it doesn't matter. All Chuuya can think about is the feverish, nearly painful, pull inside his heart, dragging him forward to crash against Dazai like he is the earth, the shore, the stable ground under his feet, and Chuuya is the wave shattering into a billion tiny pieces.

But Dazai's lips are firm and grounding, his hands a steady anchor where they wind around his waist, and Chuuya isn't falling apart but coming together piece by piece.

Chuuya lets out a shocked gasp when his back suddenly hits something hard and cold–the elevator doors–and Dazai uses it as an opportunity to seize his chin, hold him there and lick inside his mouth. It's nothing like the impressive display of patience he has been teasing Chuuya with all day, nothing like his artificially schooled facial expressions or calculated body language. No, this is all untamed fervor, blistering attraction, and the graceless instincts of the human

body. And Chuuya feels like he is sinking, his organs quivering, lungs trembling, his surroundings whizzing by as they fall and fall and –

Suddenly the stable surface behind him gives away and Chuuya only has enough time to realize the doors are sliding open but not enough time to react, let alone fathom that calling for his ability is useless when he is pressing every possible stretch of his skin against someone who nullifies abilities.

This is how in his thirteen years of (actual) living, Nakahara Chuuya *stumbles* for the first time. Not enough to fall because his arms are still looped around Dazai's neck, but enough to trip over his own feet and consequently over Dazai's and knock their heads together.

"Shit," he mumbles, untangling from Dazai to steady himself and rub his temple, feeling like someone just punched him with a hammer. "What the fuck."

"Jesus," Dazai groans somewhere nearby. "Why is your head so *hard?"*

A scowl cuts through his pained wince as he glares up at Dazai. "My head is the *normal* amount of hard."

Dazai's grouchy expression softens as he looks back at him, eye crinkling around the edges. The elevator doors try to shut and hum unhappily when they are unable to do so because of the man that is blocking them. "Heh. Who knew that all it took was an elevator to take down two of the arguably most powerful people in the city," he idly remarks as he pushes away from that death trap and places a hand on Chuuya's back to get them moving again.

Chuuya grunts to himself. "I'm so glad that no one else lives on this floor."

"You are welcome ~"

Fishing his key card out of his pocket, he shoots Dazai a half-hearted side glance. Chuuya's lips are still buzzing with the aftertaste of Dazai's mouth, so he can't bring himself to be annoyed about anything but that interruption just now.

He remains silent until the door falls shut behind them and they both exhale in unison, slowly going on about kicking off their shoes. Only once Chuuya's out of his suit jacket does he pause to look at Dazai and say, "So… let's try this again."

Dazai replies with a pair of quirked brows, and a charmed half-smile that Chuuya feels against him after he drags him down by his tie. It tastes like whiskey and sin and poison and *Dazai* as he kisses Chuuya back, slow and steady, just lips brushing and catching in a surprisingly docile game of teamwork for once.

But that can only last so long.

Not when Chuuya is Chuuya and Dazai is Dazai and every shared breath that passes between them adds fuel to a forest fire that has been long in the making.

Dazai cups the back of his neck; his thumb seeks out his jaw to tip his head a bit higher, and he flicks his tongue against Chuuya's, goading him into chasing him. Fingers fisting around the tie to yank him even closer, he obviously takes the bait, humming, licking inside his mouth, then growling and biting his bottom lip when Dazai denies him, only giving him chaste and gentle instead of deep and earth-shattering.

"Motherfucker," Chuuya hisses between kisses and breathy, slick noises, his hands curving around Dazai's face to take what he has *earned*. "I hate you." That earns him a shuddering inhale, and somehow it's the best thing he has ever felt. *"So much."*

Dazai slides one hand down the length of his spine before slipping it under his shirt, fingertips mapping out the skin of his lower back. And out of all the things to break Chuuya out of his trance, it's this. A small noise slips out of him, low and needy, asking for more—so much more than this.

What he gets instead is the shape of a knowing smile before Dazai exploits the momentum to push, push, push –

Until Chuuya's back is against the wall and his entire body against Dazai. His chest—both of their chests rise and fall heavily. Chuuya tips his chin up to look at Dazai and lets his head rest against the wall behind him, shivering silently as the fingers under his shirt trace wide circles into his skin.

"I want to ruin you," Dazai tells him and leans down to drag his lips over Chuuya's jaw. "Take you apart piece by piece, then fuck you back together."

Torn between feeling appalled and feeling excited, Chuuya exhales a harsh breath, or maybe it's a gasp, and rolls his head to the side to give Dazai more room to play with, his nails digging into the

shoulders they're clutching.

"Will you let me?"

"You can try," Chuuya whispers before his voice bleeds into a gasp as Dazai's mouth zeroes in on a sensitive spot on his neck, teeth grazing his skin, then sucking at it until Chuuya's arching against him, arms shaking under the onslaught of sensation.

He tells himself that he falls over Dazai's mouth like a starving animal to make a point, to show Dazai that he can try all he wants but that Chuuya isn't going to fall into pieces just because his dry spell has made him extra horny today, and not because he is growing addicted to it, chasing Dazai's lips again and again without giving himself time to even breathe.

That excuse crumbles to pieces when Dazai has to drag him away with a finger curling around Chuuya's choker, just so he can take a much-need gulp of air, jerk his head to the side and say, "Bedroom."

Panting, Chuuya stares back at him for a moment before he forces himself to let go of him and move his legs.

Bedroom.

Right.

He pulls his shoulders back and doesn't check to see if Dazai is following him to spare himself at least a part of his dignity on his way to the bedroom. He does feel a frown ghost over his face when he crosses the threshold and doesn't instantly get pushed against the door frame right then and there.

Instead Dazai's steps are slow and measured, his smile poised as he pauses in front of Chuuya just to lower his hands to harness around his chest. Transfixed, Chuuya watches his long, slender fingers make quick work to get it off him before popping open the buttons of his shirt, one by one, until Chuuya's limbs are aching with the urge to rip himself free of any clothing just so they can get on with it. Then the air of the room hits his chest though, making the air that he sucks into his lungs with each ragged breath tingle because the same fingers finally slide over bare skin.

They pause when they trace the small piece of metal lodged in his belly button.

Chuuya's eyes flutter up to meet Dazai's, squinting back at him.

"What?" he says. "Never seen a piercing before?"

Dazai exhales a small, soundless chuckle, mouth pulling into a sharp smile, as he rubs his thumb over the piercing. "No, I like it. It's pretty."

Before Chuuya finds a reasonable thing to say in reply, Dazai bumps his knees against him. "Lie down."

Chuuya's nose wrinkles because of how clinical he sounds, but if it takes him one step closer to getting laid, he's not going to protest. He lets Dazai crowd him backward until the back of his thighs hit the bed frame, then a flat palm over his abdomen pushes him down on the bed, and Chuuya goes willingly, only bracing himself on his elbows because he wants to look.

The glint in Dazai's gaze is pure satisfaction, practically dripping with excitement.

It only widens when he trails his fingertips over Chuuya's arms, then yanks them down so he can't support himself without any warning. "I'll make you relax all right, but we're going to play by my rules. Is that okay with you?"

"Maybe if you told me what your rules are, I could tell you if that's okay," he mutters.

"Your arms stay up the entire time." To demonstrate, Dazai takes hold of both of his wrists and guides them up, up, up to rest on the bedsheets behind his head. "You don't touch me, and you don't touch yourself. No exceptions."

Brows squishing together, Chuuya exhales a puffy breath. "That rule sucks."

Dazai's eyes on him are neither pushy nor impatient. He just waits him out like he knows exactly that it's not all that Chuuya has to say.

"Fine, I won't touch anything," he ends up grumbling even though simply lying there without being able to do anything makes him feel like a lazy pillow princess. He is *not* a lazy pillow princess. "But if that's your idea of blowing off my steam, then you might not be as smart as I thought you were. I *like* giving as much as I like receiving, and it – it…" His rant trails off into a choked-out breath as Dazai's

mouth descends to his jaw again, finding a sensitive spot right below it so quickly that Chuuya's chest stutters unsteadily.

Above him, Dazai is still keeping his wrists pressed together, but his grip tightens ever so slightly and pushes them down into the mattress. It makes Chuuya arch–right into the lips nipping at the skin on his neck. That alone has him already squeezing his eyes shut with all the different sensations, but then a knee slides between his thighs, giving him the pressure that he has been craving for hours now, and it draws a pathetic gasp out of Chuuya.

"You were saying?" A dangerous flash of sharp teeth grazes his skin as Dazai murmurs the question against his collarbone.

"You're rubbing me off with your knee. Of course that fucking turns me on," Chuuya mutters, his chest rising heavier and heavier with each provoking slide of lips. "Get over yourself."

Dazai's hum reverberates through him. "It's *my* knee that turns you on." The change in pressure against his groin robs Chuuya of the reply he was about to spit out. "And *me* who will strip off all these defensive layers clinging to you one by one until the only thing you will be able to feel and want and see is *me,* so you will never be able to get turned on again without remembering this ."

That little speech is all kinds of condescending, and yet each word makes the air in Chuuya's lungs grow hotter and hotter.

Not that he is going to make it *easy* for the man. "You sound like a freak," he breathes out, forcing his eyelids open to stare up at him. "A possessive, jealous, narcissistic *freak* ."

"And you sound awfully aroused by it," Dazai quips back before he buries his face in the crook of Chuuya's shoulder, pulling at his flesh with teeth and lips, sucking until Chuuya tries to squirm away, too much stimulation for such a ticklish spot. Without his arms though, he is forced to rely on the rest of his body. He tries to kick Dazai's thigh, but the bastard shifts his knee, the friction against the bulge in his slacks increasing, and Chuuya's head ends up tossing back, torn between growling, and moaning the man's name.

"Red if you want me to stop," Dazai says when he pulls away, "yellow if you're not sure but it's getting too much, and green… well, green is if I should keep going."

That incites a scoff. "What is this, some kind of porn film?"

Dazai's face hovers right above him, his mouth curled into a slight pout that should not look this adorable when they are like this. "The opposite, actually. "

Chuuya lets out a ragged breath, already wound tight enough to feel frustrated even though all Dazai has done so far is kiss his neck and let him rut against his knee. He hasn't even *touched* Chuuya yet. Not the way his body craves to be touched.

"Hurry it up then," he grumbles. "I don't need hours of foreplay for this."

In fact, he doesn't like foreplay at all when it's he who has to suffer through it. Chuuya likes it fast, a little rough and dirty.

As if to remind him, Dazai taps his fingers over the pulse point on Chuuya's wrists. "My rules, remember?"

Chuuya hisses out a breath through clenched teeth. *Fuck his rules.*

"Chuuya, sweetheart," Dazai's voice becomes serious, bordering on tender, "you don't have to do anything that you don't want to do, and I would not hold it against you if you said red and walked away right now. But you said you trust me, and if you still do, then allow me to show you something. Just this once."

"Show me what? That you're going to irritate and tease me to death?"

"Show you that letting go of control can be just as liberating as seizing it."

Chuuya's eyes narrow. "You want to dominate me, that it?"

"You can call it that, yes." Dazai's eyes twinkle mischievously. "I have this theory that you will come to enjoy it. *Really* enjoy it. All you have to do is let it happen."

"And what if I end up hating it?"

"Then you tell me to stop, and I will."

The lawless god inside Chuuya roars and hisses at the idea of handing over control to someone else, especially to someone like Dazai who will smirk at the inch that he is given and take a mile instead.

But the guy who drank himself into a stupor and *begged* Dazai to make him feel something other than the crushing sense of loneliness and

shame inside tentatively wants to lean into the hand that Dazai is offering him. Because it's *Dazai*. Because he is always there, piecing him together when his stitches come loose, and ironically enough, the only damn person in his life right now that has not left him.

The truth is that Chuuya wants to give in. He wants to be claimed by someone, anyone really, just so he will have a place to belong. And he wants Dazai to never stop looking at him like he is looking at him right now. Like Chuuya is something worth touching. Like he is capable of being good, even if it's only in bed.

"Fine," he whispers, blowing all the air in his lungs out of his nostrils. "Okay."

"Okay." Dazai nods, and his fingers are achingly gentle when they cup his cheek, thumb tracing freckles and flushed skin. "Can you keep your arms up like this, or do you need me to tie them up?"

"I'll… manage."

After another nod, Dazai releases his grip around his wrists and lets his hand slide down his chest instead and to his tummy, rising and falling with each bated breath, before slipping them under the waistband of his slacks, only enough to let Chuuya's hips lift and make him clench his teeth in frustration when all he gets is *nothing*.

"So eager," Dazai murmurs, eyes gleaming, and promptly pushes his hips back down with a tut of his lips. "But none of that."

Chuuya forces back the urge to snap back immediately, and waits, breathes and hopes as anticipation pulses through him in dizzying waves.

But it works.

Thick silence hangs between them when Dazai, at last, snaps open his belt and drags down his zipper with swift, practiced movements.

Chuuya expects him to take this just as slow, so when not only his pants but also his underwear get jerked down, a rush of goosebumps and heated nerves shoot up his spine. Here he is, naked, hard, and flushed in front of Dazai, and yet the anxious knot in his stomach gets overshadowed by the perverse thrill that flutters through his guts.

Because Dazai's eyes take him in like they want to devour Chuuya, and that…

Chuuya wants that too.

Deciding to get this going, just a tiny bit, Chuuya shifts until his feet are planted on the mattress. Then he spreads them for Dazai, keeping his eyes fixed on his dark-eyed expression the entire time.

“Here,” he breathes out. “You want control? Take it. I’m handing it to you.”

Dazai meets his gaze for only a heartbeat, the flash of a predator licking his lips, and then –

For someone who wanted this exact thing to happen, the squeak that slips out of Chuuya’s throat is decidedly shocked when Dazai grabs his thighs and keeps them spread and open so he can lean down to lick a long strip across his aching dick with the flat of his tongue, his hot breath washing over him.

After all the teasing, that is enough to elicit a low hiss and make Chuuya almost lower his arms to Dazai’s head. He catches himself in time though, blindly curling his fingers in a pillow nearby.

“I don’t think I ever told you,” Dazai says and lets his lips brush against the pulsating tip of Chuuya’s cock, “but your legs need to be worshiped.”

Chuuya grunts impatiently in reply, trying to raise his hips so Dazai can finish what he started.

“For now, though… these beautiful things are too much of a distraction.” Suddenly his thighs are being pinned down by Dazai’s arm. The only reason why Chuuya doesn’t blow a fuse is that finally, finally tight, warm fingers touch his cock–not doing anything, but even that alone is enough to provide some kind of relief.

“Keep them still for me, yeah?” Dazai’s lashes flutter as he makes a point of meeting Chuuya’s half-lidded eyes. “Or you will keep me from doing my work, and you want me to do my work properly, right?”

How he is supposed to suffer through this without moving his arms or his legs, Chuuya has no idea. He is an active person, especially in bed. He likes to give as much as he gets, but…

But Dazai is digging his thumb into the slit of Chuuya’s cock, swiping away the precum that has gathered there and dragging it down with him in a maddeningly slow tempo, and Chuuya is so hard he fears his

dick will fall off, so —

“Yes, okay, fine,” Chuuya blurts out, eyes squeezed shut because of the frustrated whimper he is trying to stifle. “I’ll keep still and won’t move and won’t touch anything, just fucking get going already!”

Whatever the hell Dazai wants from him to do his damn *work*, Chuuya will do it.

Dazai doesn’t answer and Chuuya’s torn between growling and whimpering from frustration –

Fingers start dragging over his cock, pulling down the foreskin only so the pointy tip of a tongue can press into his slit, then swirl around it and lap at him while a fist is stroking him lazily. Chuuya’s hips ache to lift and meet the movements so badly that it hurts, but he inhales, exhales, and forces himself to lie still just so Dazai won’t *stop*.

Because what he’s doing is good. It’s not enough to get him anywhere near an orgasm, too slow and too teasing, but without being able to move, only lying there and taking whatever he can get, everything feels crassly intensified. Even the softest hitch of breath from Dazai makes his dick twitch in response.

“See? It’s not that hard to be patient.”

Chuuya nearly strangles his pillow to bite down the reply that begs to tumble off his lips.

But when Dazai rewards his silence with a slick kiss to the tip, lips suckling at the sensitive glands until trails of spit start trickling down and mixing with his precum —

He thinks that maybe it’s not so hard, after all.

Maybe all he has to do is listen and Dazai will keep his promise of making him relax and forget about everything for a while.

(Though Chuuya doesn’t realize at that moment that he is focusing so hard on keeping still that there is not much room for any more thoughts besides that.)

Dazai keeps jerking him off, flicking his wrist on every stroke up and only using his tongue or his lips to play with him until Chuuya’s hips twitch. It’s frustrating in a way that everything is with Dazai, but bit by bit, pleasure begins to build in the base of his stomach. Slowly.

Steadily.

Chuuya thinks he has the rhythm figured out. The more noises he allows to slip out, the more lenient Dazai is with his mouth—and he intends to use it to his advantage. However, Dazai crosses whatever tattered plan was forming in Chuuya's head just now when he squeezes him and wraps his mouth around the head of his cock.

Warm, wet heat overruns Chuuya, dragging a low moan out from the back of his throat as his fingers scrabble for something to hold on to. There isn't much, just a stupid pillow and useless sheets when all he wants to do is to tangle his fingers in Dazai's hair and thrust forward.

But he can't.

He can't do that. He's not allowed to move his arms or his thighs. But Dazai never said anything about his *back*, right?

The lips around him are tight and wonderful, keeping enough suction as Dazai moves up and down on him at a pace that matches his fist to make the heat mount *fast.* And so, with a keening groan, Chuuya's spine arches off the bed, taking his hips with him to chase that sensation.

There is a wet breath when Dazai pulls off him and quickly pushes Chuuya back down with a hand on his navel. For a moment, Chuuya thinks this is *it*, Dazai is going to go even slower now, but not even a moment later, the heat returns and –

Chuuya chokes, muscles tensing as Dazai takes his cock all the way into his mouth. Until the cold tip of his nose reaches skin. It's too much. It's maddeningly deep and slick and he feels Dazai's throat swallow around him. It's *perfect.*

"Fuck," he groans, head tossing back. "*Shit.* That's just it."

Chuuya's got decent stamina, so usually, it takes a few more minutes of a blow job, even if it's a fairly good one, to get him this close, but Dazai must have some magical kind of tongue or something because Chuuya feels himself hurtling towards the peak in no time.

Then fingers slip lower, massaging his tight-strung balls and Chuuya lets out a shuddering cry. "God, I'm close, I'm almost there… ha, yes… yes… y—"

And all of a sudden it's all *gone.*

Dazai pulls away.

The abrupt loss of heat and suction around his cock leaves Chuuya so stunned that the noise he makes is barely human. His hips buck uselessly. His thighs quiver. His orgasm that was literally *right there* wanes quickly, replaced by an aching cold.

"Dazai," he croaks out, hands reaching for his hair to tug him down and – and *give him back his orgasm.* "What – what the hell are you doing? I was right there – I was –"

But the fingers that catch him aren't as nice anymore. Neither is the look in Dazai's eyes when he crawls up to press his arms back to their place. "I told you not to touch me. Is listening to this one thing really so hard, Chuuya?"

"What?" Chuuya shakes his head, head still spinning from the fact that he was so close before Dazai just – "You stopped! Why did you stop?!"

"Why didn't you lie still even though I told you to?"

Chuuya's mouth clamps shut. Since he doesn't have an answer to that question, he kicks out his feet, biting down on his teeth so hard that he fears they might break.

"Isn't this just a wonderful picture that you make?" Dazai murmurs, stroking a hand over the side of his face. "Acting like a baby that's throwing a temper tantrum just because you didn't get to finish. I wonder what people would say if they saw you like this."

"Fuck you," Chuuya snaps.

But Dazai takes it in stride, his smile deepening. "The next time you decide not to listen and be a brat," he says with a voice that's sweeter than honey, "I will not let you come for another hour." Chuuya's eyes widen. "And if that lesson doesn't stick, I will get you so close to coming that you will start crying when I won't let you. Then I will tie you to this bed so you won't be able to touch yourself and sit over there in the corner and do my paperwork for the rest of the night. Got it?"

Chuuya has to swallow several times before he manages a shaky nod.

He doesn't want to spend an entire night suffering in silence.

He wants to come *now*.

“Say it, Chuuya. Say that you understand and that you will be good this time.”

And the thing is –

He *could* say no. He could yell and hiss and utter the magic word *red,* and Dazai would stop being so mean. Chuuya could, but now that the challenge is out there…

Getting his reward without actually earning doesn’t sound nearly as satisfying.

“I understand.” It all but spills out of him. “I won’t touch you, I swear.”

“Good boy,” Dazai says softly—and something about it, his gentle tone, the warmth in his eyes when he brushes the sweaty strands of hair behind Chuuya’s ear, or maybe it’s the term itself— *good boy*— makes his chest sick with longing. Though Chuuya forces that fleeting moment of weakness as far away as possible.

Thankfully, Dazai’s face begins the journey down again, stopping over his abs to suck kisses into his skin before slotting himself between his thighs again. This time, he doesn’t keep Chuuya’s legs pinned to the bed. Instead, he pushes them up and against his stomach. It puts him on full display, but he can’t find any fucks to give about what he looks like right now. If it takes Dazai to fold him like a fucking pretzel to return to sucking him off again, then Chuuya will bend himself whichever way Dazai wants him to. *Anything* because his cock is throbbing painfully with every brush of skin against skin, and it’s driving him insane.

Dazai does return to it. Partly anyways. He thumbs at the tip of Chuuya’s cock until he’s twitching, then starts pumping him slowly, but the thing about Chuuya’s orgasm is that even though it was suddenly cut off, it never really went away. So now, every stroke no matter how shallow, makes the pleasure shoot up his spine again with a vengeance.

Only for Dazai to let go of him again the moment Chuuya tenses for a bit too long, getting a little too close.

He whimpers, chest hitching with hiccupping breaths. “What was that for?”

“I promised to take you apart, remember? I’m doing that.”

“No, you’re just –” His mouth falls open soundlessly when Dazai’s hands curve around his ass, squeezing his cheeks first, then spreading them obscenely wide.

Christ, he thought a blow job is all that he was going to get but if Dazai is going to fuck him –

His guts clench at the thought alone.

“I’m just what?” Dazai coaxes, followed by the sound of a bottle cap clicking open. Sizzling excitement quickly overshadows the question of where the hell Dazai got the lube from—because Chuuya doesn’t have any here… not in arm’s reach anyway.

“Nothing.” He grabs a pillow and presses it against his mouth to stop himself from doing anything that would give Dazai a reason to not fuck him stupid.

“Chuuya, don’t do that.” This time, Dazai doesn’t sound cold or demanding but a little whiny. “Why would I go through all this trouble to make you sing only for you to silence yourself? I want to *hear* .”

Groaning under his breath, Chuuya shoves the pillow away from his face, so he can at least hold onto it.

“Good,” Dazai praises. “Very good.” And the reward is a slick finger circling the puckered flesh around his rim until he’s twitching. Chuuya stops breathing, hoping that it will earn him another reward, like, for example –

This.

Dazai slides a finger into him. It’s slender but it’s also long, reaching deep inside him. Chuuya’s head falls back, exhaling. It’s nice. Satisfying in a way that oral rarely manages to be.

It doesn’t take Dazai long to push in a second one, shifting on the bed so he can watch Chuuya’s face when his digits curve inside him and bump against that sweet spot.

Chuuya’s thoughts evaporate into white noise at the shock of intense pleasure that rips through him. It’s *so much.* After the last twenty minutes, it almost feels like too much, but Dazai does it again and

again and –

“Yes, yes, god, this feels *so good,”* Chuuya chants, subconsciously rocking back against the fingers, hands flexing and unflexing in rumpled sheets. “You’ll –” His abs hurt from tensing so hard. “— you’ll let me come this time, right? I’ve been good, I didn’t touch you, I deserve this –”

Dazai builds him up right until the moment he doesn’t, the thrusts slowing down and mellowing out into a faint massage that makes it *impossible* to get anywhere.

“Not yet, sweetheart.”

A frustrated, high-pitched cry rips out of Chuuya. “Why not?!”

“Because you’re not quite there yet,” Dazai murmurs and coils his free hand around Chuuya’s trembling thigh, kneading his skin. “I want you so out of it that you won’t be able to even remember your name. Do you remember your name?”

“No,” he lies in a piss-poor attempt at cheating his way into an orgasm.

“Liar.”

“Dazai… please.” His whine makes his entire body shake against the mattress. “I need it. I really, really need it.”

“Is that a red?”

“No, it’s an *I fucking hate you,”* Chuuya snarls.

Because no matter how much he wants it, and how much it hurts each time Dazai pulls away to leave him locked out in the cold, giving up and coming without actually earning it would not feel *right* anymore. It would suck! And after all this torture, Chuuya doesn’t want it to suck!

“Don’t be mean, Chuuya.”

“ *You’re* mean!”

“I’m just keeping my promise and it goes like… ah, yes, like this.” The fingers slide out, leaving Chuuya horribly empty one second, then shuddering wildly the next when Dazai wraps a tight fist around his aching cock and strokes him *hard* and *fast.*

The sensation is so overwhelming that it tears him apart from the inside, robs him of any coherent thought, makes his body thrash and–

And then it all disappears.

Again.

And Chuuya doesn't have enough lucidity left to stifle the volume of his pathetic whimpering or to downplay the intensity of the icy waves that quiver through him, making his hips, thighs, legs, arms, everything, jerk like broken parts.

In the midst of it all, he hears Dazai's voice somewhere, but it's hard to make out anything other than the fact that it *hurts* –

It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, and he wants to come.

"—ey, hey, you're okay." Fingers seize his hands and squeeze them until he manages to squeeze them back. "You're okay, Chuuya. I know it hurts, but it will be worth it, right? You want it to be worth it?"

Chuuya isn't sure whether he is nodding or shaking his head or doing both at the same time. All he knows is that he *wants* —

"I know that you want to come. I know, sweetheart, I know, and you will. Just a little more. Think you can hold on for a bit longer?"

Yes, yes, Chuuya can hold on for a bit longer. If that will make him good this one time, he can. But if he opens his mouth, he will beg Dazai to make him come and he doesn't want to, he wants to be *good*, and suffer through this pain just so it will be worth it and –

All it takes is for lips to wrap around the head of his cock and s *uck,* and Chuuya can already feel the orgasm rushing back.

He knows Dazai won't let him, knows that he will pull away before that. It doesn't make it any easier.

It doesn't make it easier the next time starts fingering him again either.

And the next time his thumb massages his perineum while his fingers squeeze his cock so tightly, they don't even allow any of the pleasure to run through.

Chuuya loses himself in it, drifting off every time the heat builds, and jerking back into the moment every time Dazai refuses to push him

over the edge.

At this point, it takes Dazai mere seconds to have him dangling over the cliff, but then he goes *so slow* with his fingers, four of them now, that the climb drags on and on and on, setting every single nerve inside him aflame in the process, and when the pressure against his prostate reduces to a feather-light grind before he can come yet again —

The thread of Chuuya's dwindling endurance snaps.

His legs are shaking so hard that they ache with exertion, and he kicks them, punching the mattress, before reaching down to touch himself –

"Hey, none of that."

"I don't care! I can't – I want to *come* – make me come! Make me come! Make me –"

The sound of a slap resonates through the room.

A few seconds later Chuuya's cheek starts stinging. He blinks, eyes bleary and wet with salt and tears, realizing that Dazai just *slapped* him.

"There you go," Dazai murmurs and soothes the burn that his palm left with the same hand except that it's gentle this time. Tender. "It's not so bad now, is it?"

Sniffing, Chuuya takes hold of that hand, clinging to it desperately.

"Okay?" Dazai asks.

All he can really do is whimper.

The pain helped with the worst of it, but the pleasure, the feverish urge to finish, and the pleasant haze are still very much there. His head is, in fact, so thick with cotton that he is not even sure whether any of this is real. It doesn't feel real. It feels like a dream. Chuuya's skin feels like it's made out of goo. Like it's liquid. Like someone would just have to push the tip of their finger into him to reach inside his chest and grab hold of his heart.

Dazai lifts their intertwined hands to his lips and presses a kiss there before he returns them to Chuuya. "You're looking mighty lost right

now. Does it feel good not having to think anymore?"

The words reach his ear, but it's like there is a door between them, muffling their intensity.

When Chuuya finally responds, it's with a gasp that Dazai coaxes out of him by touching his chest. He flicks his thumb over his nipple over and over, and pulls at it, eliciting another shivery breath.

"I bet it does."

Dazai's lips wrap around the other nipple then, so feverishly hot that it makes Chuuya jerk and twitch and shudder. A silky tongue swirls around the bud, dragging Chuuya out of his delirious daydream and into his body with a graze of teeth, then soothing the pain with mind-numbing suction.

"You're so hyper-sensitive right now that I could probably make you come just by playing with your chest. Would you like that?" Dazai rolls one nipple between his fingers until Chuuya moans. "Get to come like this?"

Chuuya's brain is stuffed but he still whines, shaking his head because *no*, he's supposed to come with Dazai's fingers inside him or his mouth around him, not like this, this sucks and –

"Let's test that theory another time because, for now, you've been good. So good for me, Chuuya. You deserve to come, don't you?"

Chuuya jerks his head up and down. Yes, yes, he *deserves* it. He has *earned* it.

"I agree. I think you deserve to let go all over my mouth as you fuck yourself silly. How's that sound, huh? Does that sound good?"

It sounds amazing. It sounds great. Chuuya wants it.

Dazai's hands seem to be everywhere—his chest, the hard lines of his stomach, his thighs—and then they settle on his ass, thumb rubbing at his twitching hole before three fingers finally slide inside. They build a slow, steady rhythm that quickly makes his blood stir, and Chuuya clenches madly like that's going to stop Dazai from leaving again if he decides to trick him one last time. But instead, they speed up, fucking into him with a rhythm that makes all that pent-up pleasure mount to dangerously new heights. Chuuya's back arches. It's good, so damn good, they're just not quite hitting the spot that he needs them to and

–

“You can let go now. Let go all over me, sweetheart.”

Dazai simultaneously swallows his cock down and curves his fingers just right, and it’s everything that Chuuya needs. Tangling his fingers in Dazai’s hair, he keeps him there and fucks up into his mouth, desperately chasing the finish line that’s finally within his reach and –

He comes explosively.

His orgasm breaks through him with force and without any warning, flooding him with fierce white-hot ecstasy until he feels like he’s gone both deaf and blind. He’s never felt anything like this. Usually, he still has some sort of control over his body, even if it’s small, but this –

This goes beyond anything he has ever experienced.

Especially as Dazai’s throat works him through it the entire time, tightening every time Chuuya thinks the pleasure is going to weaken only for Dazai to arouse another mind-numbing wave, milking more cum out of his twitching cock.

It’s perfect chaos.

At last, relief fills him like the smoke of a drug, soaking every single muscle in his body in pure bliss that lets Chuuya *float*.

Dazai’s fingers keep pressing against his prostate, not letting up until Chuuya’s thighs try to clamp around him to stop the sharp surge of overstimulation seizing him. Only then does Dazai stop.

Even the bare air in the room feels electric against Chuuya’s skin in the aftermath, making his muscles twitch and shudder, but he barely has enough wits about him to pay attention to that.

He lets himself slump back, the fall and rise of his chest evening out into a calmer rhythm. Everything around him is warm and mellow. He is naked from head to toe, exposed and displaying ten different shades of vulnerability, yet his fingers remain where they are–thrown over his face, not itching to cover himself because it’s *nice*. The hand that rubs his thigh feels nice too.

“Good?” he hears Dazai ask.

The question itself only draws a grunt out of Chuuya. The breathy

hitch in Dazai's voice and the noise of rustling fabric ends up coaxing his eyes open, though. Chuuya's breath catches when he sees Dazai's slacks hang open, his hand wrapped around his –

"No," Dazai says and pushes him down before Chuuya can even manage to sit up. "You stay. Just like this."

"Dazai," Chuuya whines, still floating in the afterglow of his orgasm but already conscious enough to complain about the idea of not returning the favor, especially when Dazai's dick is right *there*, nestled inside his fist, flushed at the tip and leaking precum as he strokes himself. "Let me *help."*

"I don't want you to help. I want you to lie here, all pretty and fucked out, and that's it." And when he doesn't get an immediate reply, Dazai says, "Come on, be a good boy for me one more time and *don't* move."

Chuuya's teeth tug at his bottom lip, stubbornly staring at Dazai's unfairly composed expression before his eyes fall to his cock instead and…

Shifting a bit on the bed, he nods, not without blowing out a sigh though. "Fine." Because as much as he wants to help, watching Dazai jerk off is undeniably *hot*.

Strange too because Chuuya has never just laid around for someone to whack off; then again, he has never been reduced to *that* before either.

"Good." There is a panting edge to Dazai's tone now, and Chuuya's dick twitches all over again with the knowledge that *he* is responsible for that. He. Chuuya.

Enraptured, he watches Dazai's hand stroke over his shaft and along the head. He has to consciously press his lips together to stop himself from doing something embarrassing like drooling at the sight. He channels that energy to wind one leg around Dazai's knee instead, wordlessly urging him to shuffle a bit closer.

Dazai does, fist starting to move faster, a little slicker from both the lube and his own glistening precum, and when their eyes meet in the charged silence of the room, Chuuya feels like he is falling, tumbling, getting sucked into those black eyes of his and being devoured, alive and whole.

"Come on, Dazai," he finds himself whispering without his permission, arching his neck to the side. "Let go for me, huh?"

Dazai squeezes his eyes shut and hisses, cock throbbing between his fingers. Then he groans, deep and guttural, and spills all over Chuuya's body, the first streak landing on his chest, the other one on his stomach, mixing with his own release on his groin. It draws a shuddering moan out of Chuuya, hands itching with the urge to reach up and take what is his but twisting them in the sheets instead so he can greedily watch Dazai milk out another string of milky cum, grunting out a gasp. It takes a few seconds until his shoulders slump and he stills, though his chest continues to rise and fall heavily.

Eyes fluttering shut, Chuuya lets his head fall back too, feeling like he was the one who just came all over again instead of Dazai. It's a nice feeling. Hazy and warm.

"Rest now," he hears Dazai say from a place that seems to be worlds away. "I'll get something to clean up. I'll be right back, yeah?"

Chuuya only manages to grunt in reply.

He basks in the lazy afterglow for a while, floating in the tunnel between hazy consciousness and sleep. His thoughts come in the form of smoky pictures. Dazai making them stumble like a pair of floundering idiots. Dazai's mouth, hot and generous and so cruel. The sting of Dazai's hand. Salt and wetness sliding down Chuuya's cheeks… salt that did not only come from sweat.

Blinking his eyes open, he stares at the ceiling. It's a little daunting to have been stripped bare and torn open so easily. By Dazai of all people. But it was good. Really good. So maybe it's okay.

It takes him a considerable amount of time to gather enough energy to roll to his side and reach for the blanket, just as Dazai comes back.

"Has anyone ever told you that you're terrible at keeping up your household?"

Chuuya tries to sit up when he sees the towel that he is carrying. "You don't have to –"

"Didn't I tell you to rest?" Dazai chides and effortlessly pushes him back on the bed, wiping his body clean with swift and efficient strokes.

"I agreed to let you boss me around *one* time," he mutters because this still doesn't mean that Dazai has to clean him up like Chuuya's too incompetent to do it himself. "Don't let it get to your head."

“I should have guessed it wouldn’t last long for you.”

By *it,* Chuuya assumes that he means that temporary high he was floating in just a couple of minutes ago, a lot like the bliss of an orgasm except that it felt ten times better and lasted way longer than that too.

“I mean it, relax, Chuuya,” Dazai murmurs, wrapping the blankets tightly around him like this is a cocoon and he is preparing Chuuya to turn into a butterfly. “This can turn sour very quickly if you don’t take enough time to – *stop groping me!”*

Tired of hearing Dazai talk bullshit, Chuuya intended to shut him up by, you know, returning the favor since that is what people do when they engage in sexual activities. They give and they take. Quid pro quo and all that.

Apparently, Dazai has different ideas.

“Get your little hands off me,” he hisses, only sounding half-serious, probably because Chuuya’s little hands are very good at what they do. “Maybe you were too out of it to notice but I already took care of myself!”

“Exactly. By *yourself*,” Chuuya hisses back and returns his scolding look with a glare. “Now let *me* do it.”

“I don’t need you to do anything but rest.”

“But –"

“No buts.” And suddenly Dazai is lifting the sheets and climbing under them, using Chuuya’s momentary lapse in reaction to nudge him to his other side and… press their bodies together. “Here.” He goes one step further and slides his arms around Chuuya’s waist, drawing him back into devastating heat.

“What…” Chuuya has to swallow to get his vocal cords to function. “What are you doing?”

“Holding you,” Dazai answers like *that* is what Chuuya meant.

“And why are you doing that?”

Dazai’s sigh washes over his neck. Chuuya doesn’t anticipate him to press his cold nose into his neck too so he ends up letting out an

undignified squeak.

What the hell.

“Close and long body contact releases endorphins in your brain,” Dazai murmurs. “You just experienced something like a body-high, but after a body-high, there always comes a drop. This can help mellow out the drop into a smoother ride.”

“Dazai,” Chuuya breathes out through clenched teeth, every muscle in his body as stiff as a board, “I’m not going to burst into tears just because we didn’t…. *cuddle –”* the word alone makes him cringe. “— after sex.”

“Chuuya,” is the equally irritated response, “just let yourself be held for one damn minute.”

He grunts out an unhappy noise, though he doesn’t wrestle Dazai away either. This is very strange.

Dazai is silent for a few rigid moments. “You like holding my hand. This should feel good too.”

“God, *shut up.”*

He only *occasionally* enjoys holding Dazai’s hand because of his nullification ability. That’s it.

“Relax.” The chest that’s pressed to his back rises and falls deeply, a rhythm that’s so infectious it coaxes Chuuya into mirroring it. “I’ve got you.”

It takes conscious effort to lean into it instead of squirming away from it.

He hasn’t been touched this way in a long time. Touched softly. Like gentleness is something he is capable of grasping. And for as long as he remembers, he has been convinced he didn’t need to either. That he didn’t want it. Because life is all sharp edges, hard blows and the never-ending weight of responsibility. There is no time—there is no place for *this.*

Until the pressure and heat of two arms around him trickles into his system, like the first taste of a drug that will end up ruining your life, and Chuuya has to press his face into the pillow so he won’t burst and spill over in the wake of it.

He craves to have someone to lean on.

Just sometimes.

But he does.

***

The jarring sound of the doorbell yanks Chuuya out of a sleep so deep that opening his eyes feels like coming out of a coma. Once he is awake though, it's even harder to ignore the irritating noise.

Ding.

Ding.

Ding.

Ding, ding, ding, ding –

"Fucking hell, I'm coming already," he growls under his breath as he drags himself out of bed and picks up a yukata from the floor to wrap it around himself. On his way to the door, he pictures all the creative ways in which he is going to kill the person on the other side of it, just so they will stop fucking ringing the bell like a maniac with a death wish. Sure, this is the mafia and all, but there is no need to be so annoying about it.

He yanks open the door with the string of insults already on the tip of his tongue –

And every single word crumbles to dust.

"Hey," says Yuan, standing in front of him with a tentative smile. Her hand lifts to wave weakly. "Surprise."

Chapter End Notes

Well, I hope it was worth the wait! They still have a bunch of other firsts to cross though :)

Next chapter we have:
- an alliance
- two terrible choices
- ... which lead to a fortuitous outcome

Chapter 23: Power of Possibility

Chapter Notes

Once again, thank you to my wonderful beta Emily for making my mess readable ;__; <3 you are the light of my life

Warnings: Explicit sexual content

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Hey,” says Yuan, standing in front of him with a tentative smile. Her hand lifts to wave weakly. “Surprise.”

“Yuan,” he breathes out, chest sagging. “What are you…? I thought – you –”

Before he finishes stammering out any of his incoherent sentence, she has already thrown herself around his neck, pressing the cold tip of her nose against his neck. *“Hi.”*

The door falls shut.

“Hey.” Chuuya hugs her as close as possible but ends up pulling away again a moment later. Perplexed. “What are you doing here? I thought…”

“That I went back to the sheep?” she finishes and sheepishly clears her throat.

“Yeah. You found them. You sent me a message.”

“I did, yeah, but…” Brushing past him and deeper into the apartment, Yuan scratches the back of her neck. “It’s kind of a long story.” She glances over her shoulder. “Can I stay here for a few days?”

“Stay as long as you want,” he tells her without a second of hesitation.

A part of him fears that he is still sleeping, stuck in a hopeless dream, so after another moment of puzzled staring, Chuuya shakes his head and decides that he needs caffeine to process. And to wake up.

“Thanks,” she says, awkwardly swinging the bag over her shoulder back and forth as she stands there and looks at him.

Chuuya jerks his head towards his bedroom. “Put down your things somewhere. Then I want to hear that story.”

“Yeah, okay.”

After another nod, she disappears around the corner.

Chuuya grips the counter as the coffee machine gets to work behind him.

Please don’t let this be a dream.

Let it be real.

Just this once.

A moment later, Yuan comes back, the bag still in her hand but her eyes twice the size. “Um, there is a man in your bed?”

A man…

This time it’s Chuuya’s eyes that widen.

Dazai.

Right.

Last night was not an eerily vivid dream either.

Last night happened.

“Is that…” Yuan tiptoes closer for some reason and doesn’t say his name out loud, mouthing it instead. “… Dazai?”

As if he had some sort of super-hearing.

Even though it’s the opposite. Dazai seems to be just as human as everyone else, considering he not only fell asleep – even though holding Chuuya was supposed to last for a few minutes – but actually slept through the entire night. Something that makes Chuuya stifle a fond smile.

Dazai actually slept.

Not just a nap.

He slept.

To Yuan though, he rolls his eyes. “You don’t have to whisper, you know.”

“So… you two?”

“So, all of you left and I had no one,” he mutters and turns around to grab a clean cup from the shelf. “The least I could do was get some.”

“Was it good?”

Chuuya pauses. Not because it wasn’t but the opposite. It *was*. Incredibly and terrifyingly good. He’s pretty sure no one ever managed to get him that worked up before. Fuck, he didn’t even know that was possible. To get fucking *high* from sex.

He’s just not sure whether he can call that sex because Chuuya never even got the chance to touch him once. He feels lazy and boring looking back at it now.

Waking up with Dazai still in his bed would have been the perfect opportunity to even the odds, but… Chuuya’s gaze slides towards Yuan. That won’t work anymore.

“What?” Her brows scrunch together as she leans forward on the counter. “Holy shit, don’t tell me it was bad?”

“Huh? No, no, it wasn’t.” Chuuya pointedly returns his gaze back to the coffee machine. “It was good, but that doesn’t matter right now. It’s your turn to talk, Yuan.”

He hears her sigh. “Fine. But give me a coffee first. I’ve slept, like, two hours in the last three days.”

So Chuuya prepares two cups, places them on the counter like a tentative peace offering, and waits for Yuan to start speaking.

“I did find them,” she begins after a hearty sip, “but what I found wasn’t really worth staying for.”

His brows furrow.

“When they all left, they didn’t know that they could just do it like that. You know, without the mafia hunting them down.” Her eyes flicker to him but fall back to her hands that are wrapped around her white cup. “So De Luca made some stupid deal with that other organization to keep them safe.”

“What other organization?”

“The Bishop’s Staff,” she mutters with a heavy breath.

Chuuya stiffens. “You’re not serious.”

“I wish I wasn’t.”

“The Bishop’s Staff,” Chuuya repeats, blinking. “Those people are *insane* . They *crucify* people. They –”

“I know, okay? Why do you think I’m here?”

“What kind of deal? Is it just protection, information, an alliance…?”

“Protection mostly, and…” Yuan makes a face, wordlessly jerking her head behind her to say *information about the port mafia* without actually uttering it out loud. Because if the boss of the port mafia hears that the sheep not only defected but that they also shared classified secrets…

No, it will be fine.

Resting his elbows on the counter, Chuuya scrubs his hands over his hair and down his face before looking up. “They barely worked here. I doubt they were able to give them anything relevant or useful.”

“That’s why they owe them now. I only talked to Shirase and Akira, but –” she grimaces. “— it didn’t sound good. They can’t leave. They’re practically hostages. Again.”

Piece by piece, understanding begins to dawn on him.

Chuuya blows out a sharp breath. “You want *me* to get them out of there. Right?”

To Yuan’s credit, she doesn’t look happy about it, her tight-lipped expression dripping with discomfort. “If I could do it myself, I would, but I’m just one person, and you’re…” her shoulders lift weakly. “You’re Chuuya.”

“They left,” he says. His cold glare is reserved for Yuan, but the words are a reminder for himself because already he is thinking of ways to help the sheep get out of the hole that they dug for themselves. “They *all* left me.”

“They’ll all get killed,” she replies just like that.

“And that’s their own fault,” a third voice suddenly pipes up from behind them. Chuuya unfolds himself from the counter to see Dazai stroll into the kitchen. His clothes are full of wrinkles, his hair a rumpled mess, and even the bandages look like they need a make-over. Of course that doesn’t make him any less pretty. Just a bit more real. “They were stupid enough to join an organization run by religious nutcases. It’s not Chuuya’s job to fix their mess.”

Watching Dazai put on the kettle, very casually, Chuuya wonders how much of the conversation he overheard, though knowing who the sheep are allied to now is without a doubt more than enough for him to connect the missing pieces.

Since a deal will be able to fix that, he doesn’t worry more than he has to. Meanwhile Yuan is barely managing to keep the glare off her face.

“They were *desperate* ,” she ends up saying, sounding the part herself. “And they fucked up, yeah, but so did you, Chuuya. We all did.”

Chuuya’s eyes flicker down to his hands.

She isn’t wrong. He did fuck up.

If he had told the sheep about the choice Dazai gave him right away, they would have never made that deal with the Bishop’s Staff in the first place. They could have just left. But he didn’t. He kept it to himself because he was too busy feeling guilty for wanting to stay, and now here they are.

Still.

“Even if I agree to help, do you seriously believe they will let me when I was the one they ran away from?”

“Of course they will.” He hates how exasperated she sounds. Like she didn’t tell him that they were afraid of Chuuya just a week ago. “It’s not like they hate you. They just –”

“You said something different last time we spoke.”

Yuan’s shoulders slump. “I… I’m sorry. I really am. I said a lot of things that I didn’t mean. I was just so angry and confused and… “ She takes a deep, almost pained breath and closes her eyes. “I’m sorry.”

“And you only realize that now… when you need Chuuya’s help

again," Dazai says before he can. "How convenient."

"I'm talking to Chuuya, not you. This has nothing to do with the port mafia."

"You're begging *my* executive to save the sorry asses of the fools who betrayed the port mafia. This has everything to do with me."

"They just left and we all know here that you were okay with that. How did they betray you?"

"I'm supposed to believe that the lambs didn't share any information when they joined opposite forces?"

Nostrils flaring, Yuan presses her mouth shut and looks at Chuuya.

Chuuya wants to go back to sleep.

"You don't have to help them," Dazai murmurs, more quietly this time, only directed at him. "You don't owe them anything."

Chuuya meets his gaze. "I can't just let them die either."

"They willingly allied with those people. What makes you think they will die?" Dazai shoots a not-so-kind look in Yuan's direction. "It's an exaggeration. They might not like it there, but they are good at surviving. They'll live."

"They were following De Luca," Yuan growls. "They didn't even know what they were agreeing to when they left."

"Then they should have paused for one second and used their heads," Dazai snaps, sounding genuinely aggravated. "Again, it's not Chuuya's responsibility to help the people who abandoned him."

"I know that! But maybe he wants to help anyway!"

Dazai's gaze is hard and cold; he folds his arms over his chest but he allows her point to linger in the air.

Sighing, Chuuya rubs the spot between his brows before shooting Dazai a glance. "The Bishop's Staff. We're going to do something about them, right?"

"We are. It's more complicated than just one organization versus another, though. They've put down too many roots here for this to be an easy take-down."

“So it might take a while?”

Dazai gives him a small nod.

Chuuya turns back to Yuan. “Are you sure they want out? You know how they are sometimes. They don’t like following anyone’s orders except their own. Maybe *that’s* what they’re so pissed about.”

But even if Yuan wasn’t desperate to save her friends, the shadow that falls over her face would be enough to convince him otherwise. “They told me things, Chuuya,” she eventually murmurs. “Things that none of them would ever have willingly chosen if they had known.”

“What kind of things?” And before she can answer that, Chuuya adds, “They spilled the port mafia secrets, Yuan. The least you can do to even the odds is spill theirs.” And no matter what the verdict ends up looking like, he already knows he will work with Dazai anyway.

She still hesitates, though he doubts it’s because of Dazai’s presence. It’s something else. “Shirase told me they have labs where they…” Instead of words, there is only an indecipherable hand gesture.

“Where they *what?”* Chuuya asks, fingers curling around the counter. “Where they experiment on ability-users? That what you’re saying?”

Yuan’s eyes meet his.

She doesn’t nod. She doesn’t have to.

His heart sinks to the bottom of his stomach. “Why would they…” He shakes his head, lost for words. For thoughts even. “How did they end up there?”

“They didn’t know,” she whispers. “They thought it was just protection, but now no one can leave without endangering the rest. One wrong move and they’ll kill off our friends one by one.”

Dazai clears his throat. “And you never stopped to consider that perhaps it could be a trap to lure in another ability user?”

“What?” Yuan’s gaze darts to him, confused at first before it flickers to Chuuya and her eyes widen in realization. “No way. *No* . They wouldn’t do something like that. *Never.”*

“It seems to me like they already did.”

She looks at Chuuya until he looks back. “Chuuya, these are our

friends that we're talking about."

"I know," he snaps, and as much as he would love to give his blind loyalty to the people who once saved him above everything else, Dazai's words aren't unreasonable. Strategically, a trap would make the most sense for the Bishop's Staff. "Maybe our friends wouldn't, but the organization that they now belong to would. For all we know, the sheep could have been just a ploy the entire time."

"So what?" Yuan blurts out. "That's it? No? You're just going to let them rot?"

"I didn't say that."

"Then what are you saying?"

Frustrated he might be, somehow it's Dazai's anger that Chuuya is more aware of right now, even more so than his own, feeling it leave ripples in the air with every stiff breath that comes out of him. As oddly touching as it is, this conversation is still something Chuuya needs to finish on his own, so he places his hand on Dazai's back, just for a moment to say that it's okay, before pulling his shoulders back and turning to Yuan.

"I'll need to talk to someone," is what he is saying. "Shirase, Akira, De Luca, anyone who's there and says that it's a mistake. I need to hear it from them. If we're going to do this, then I need to be sure that I won't be risking my head to save a bunch of people who don't want to be saved."

"It was hard enough to find them and get away the first time."

Chuuya's shoulder lifts. "You'll have time and help. And…" Sending a glance in Dazai's direction, he takes a calculated risk. "… our resources."

Dazai's expression remains a perfectly blank sheet of paper, the only hint that he even registered the lofty assumption is the fleeting twinkle of mischief in his eyes. It will cost Chuuya, he's sure of it, but he has come to like paying up.

"You'll manage," he tells Yuan.

"Okay," she says, rubbing her face with one hand, sounding worn out and drained but not against the idea. "That sounds like a plan."

Another moment passes before she asks, “Can I take a shower? I’m probably reeking.”

Chuuya just jerks his thumb towards the direction of his bathroom. He doesn’t realize how tightly he’s been clenching all of his muscles until Yuan makes her way out of the kitchen and he lets himself slouch over the counter, releasing a shuddering full-body sigh. A hand rubs the place between his shoulder blades, and he finds himself oddly grateful for that–and longing for it after the touch disappears again.

“You almost stood up for yourself,” Dazai says somewhere by his side. “The progress is minuscule but I’m sure we’ll get there someday.”

His remark is layered with condescending and mocking tones, yet for the first time in a while Chuuya doesn’t pay attention to them but to the underlying core underneath which is, and has always been, Dazai’s determination for Chuuya to make his own choices or at the very least to make them without letting the sheep influence him. It’s a strange thing to want from a man who enjoys stripping as much control as possible from Chuuya whenever he has the chance. From a man who did what he did last night.

Then again, coaxing someone to let go in bed in a manner that feels good is worlds apart from what Dazai thinks the sheep have been doing to him.

Chuuya lifts his head up to look at him. “If it’s not a trap and we do get the sheep out of there, we’ll have some decent inside information on their organization. Giving Yuan resources will benefit you too.”

“Mmm, how pragmatic of you, Chuuya,” Dazai drawls, cranking out the wattage until his smile crackles with static and warning. “You’re a quick learner but you’re still a pupil. You’ll still have to pay.”

And Chuuya hasn’t doubted that for a second ever since he uttered those words, so it’s not fear that invades his lungs. It’s excitement.

Holding Dazai’s gaze, he shifts where he stands, placing his other hand on the counter as well, bracketing Dazai in. “I can think of a few ways to pay right now.”

“Oh, yeah?” The pitch in his voice alone makes Chuuya’s abs pulse. “And what ways would that be?”

Instead of using words, Chuuya relies on a different kind of language, letting his eyes pointedly wander down between them and taking a

step forward until his waist meets Dazai's crotch.

A moment later, fingers are cupping his jaw, dragging his attention away from their bodies and up to Dazai's gaze, dark and amused. "Aren't you bold? Your precious friend is in the other room."

"Yuan always takes ages in the bathroom," he retorts even though his voice does a poor job of concealing his physical reactions. "And…" Jaw hardening stubbornly, Chuuya pushes even further, not stopping until every inch of his lower body is plastered against Dazai's. "… I'm good. I'm *fast."*

"And you're desperate," Dazai murmurs back, matching Chuuya in tone, heat, and body language–just not in his words. The smile he flashes him after drawing back and forcing Chuuya away is downright sadistic. "That wouldn't be a price but a reward, and I don't play that way."

Frazzled, Chuuya makes a low noise in the back of his throat. "I've never met anyone who doesn't consider getting their dick wet a reward."

Shrugging, Dazai slips out of the spot that Chuuya pinned him against. "I never said I wouldn't have enjoyed it. I would have. The problem is *you* would have as well."

"So I shouldn't enjoy it," Chuuya skeptically rephrases, following Dazai on his way to the door. "That's fucked up, don't you think?"

"What I'm saying is that you shouldn't get something out of being a devious little shit who uses the port mafia's resources to help a bunch of ungrateful traitors." Dazai shoots him a look over his shoulder. "And I never used nor planned to use sex as a currency. That's just you, dear. So if you want someone to call fucked up, maybe take a look in the mirror."

With these parting words of wisdom, he spirits himself away and out of his apartment, leaving Chuuya blinking at the empty space and wondering whether it's Dazai who is too confusing or whether it's Chuuya this time who has crossed a line he didn't realize existed.

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Yuan being back–for now, at least–doesn't change anything. Chuuya still gets dressed to go to work because he's still responsible for the deals and the shipment he arranged in the last few days. Besides, once

she gets out of the shower she takes the spare guest room in his place to sleep anyway.

Sorting through files in his office, Chuuya expects his mind to wander off to the sheep, but he's surprised to find a certain lightness propelling him on throughout the entire afternoon. A drive to get things done that wasn't there a few days ago. A surge of energy that is as shocking as it is appreciated. It's been a while since he felt like this.

Maybe it's having something to work towards--the sheep and putting an end to the plague that goes by the name of the Bishop's Staff.

Or maybe it's that he asked Dazai to help him unwind, and that's exactly what Dazai did. He unraveled Chuuya like a crochet ball rolling down a steep hill. (Maybe he should ask Dazai to do it again. And again. And --)

After his lunch break on another roof, he drums up his squad and they spend most of the remaining day checking out other smuggling rings in Yokohama, observing, learning from them, but also studying how to best get rid of them later on.

He gets back home somewhere around ten in the evening, the apartment draped in shadows and soft silence. Yuan's probably still sleeping then. Since he already grabbed a bite outside, he only takes a quick shower before slipping into bed with a sigh.

The morning started so suddenly that Chuuya never even realized that Dazai was still in his bed when he woke up. That he *slept* through the entire night and not just for thirty miserable minutes.

His fingers subconsciously drive over the space where he was lying last night and he even takes a sniff, trying to figure out whether Dazai left anything of himself at all, or whether he left as a ghost again. His sheets don't really smell like anything though, except maybe like the reminder that he probably should change them. Back on the streets, they didn't have the luxury to swap their bedding every time they fooled around. But now, keeping them would probably be considered unhygienic and gross…

"Hey."

Chuuya's eyes lift to the dark silhouette standing in his doorway, and he must look like a guilty deer caught in the headlight with his arm stretched out and his nose… pressing into the sheets…

“Hi,” he says, and only draws his hand up to use it as a brace for his head because acting guilty will only make him look the part even if he hasn’t done anything. He just smelled the sheets. That’s not a crime. “Thought you were asleep.”

“I woke up when you came home,” Yuan tells him.

“Oh. Sorry about that.”

A shrug. “It’s not like I didn’t sleep the entire day already.”

Right.

“Sleeping alone in a big bed with nothing but silence is creepy, though.”

Chuuya cracks a smile. “Right? It took me ages to get used to it.” After another pause, he pats the empty spot next to him, exhaling when Yuan accepts the offer to climb into bed beside him.

He doesn’t remember much of his childhood, even the one afterwards. After coming to consciousness without an identity or any memories. After seeing and hearing and smelling things but not knowing how he was able to do that. After huddling under a bridge and stumbling upon a bunch of creatures. In hindsight, they must have looked just as grimy and wild as him but at that moment they looked like gods to him.

Even after all of that, his memories are just brief flashes of occurrences. What he does remember, though, with a vicious vividity, is shaking like crazy when he tried to sleep for the first time, whether it was because he was still starving, no matter how many loaves of bread he devoured, because he was cold, or because he was scared, it all boiled down to the same thing: his powers flickering on and off like a malfunctioning light bulb.

And then someone lied down beside him, put their ever-smaller arms around him, and held him close until the tremors ebbed away into short, little breaths and then into a deep sleep.

Yuan never brought it up, but he’s pretty sure it was her that day. Everyone else would be either weirded out by his ability or annoyed because of all the ruckus he caused. Not her.

“How have you been?” she asks eventually, turning on her side to face him.

Chuuya remains on his back, shrugging as he throws one arm behind his neck because what is there to say? It's been like it's been. He lost his friends, and life went on. It always does. "Fine." He clears his throat and jerks his chin towards her. "You?"

Yuan lets out a weary sigh. "Not so good."

A beat of silence passes as he waits for her to say the things she wants to say.

"When I found them, I thought they'd be mad," she eventually starts. "I was ready for a fight but instead they were just scared. They were all terrified, Chuuya."

"Where were they?"

"Settled in a trailer park in the south."

"But the Bishop's Staff didn't see you?" he has to ask.

"No. They have this shift system. One half goes to 'work'," she air quotes with acid in her voice, "while the other is technically free to do whatever they want. Then it's the other half's turn."

"And they do what exactly?"

Rolling around to stare at the ceiling, Yuan scrubs a hand over her face. "Shirase told me the kids mostly get tasked with basic stuff, but they were forced to accompany the people to their weird sermons one time. The other ones…" She pauses. "Shirase had to sit and protocol what they were doing to an ability user. In the lab, I mean."

Chuuya forces himself to speak. "And what were they doing to them?"

"Trying to figure out how abilities work."

"What about Luca?" He hates every word of this, but he knows he has to barrel through to get all the necessary information they need, knows that Yuan has to get this out instead of keeping it to herself and letting it eat her up from the inside like a silent but festering virus. "Does he even realize what he's done?"

"I didn't see him. He was on the other shift and I left before they came back, but Shirase said that he stopped repeating every word that the organization says." She glances at Chuuya. "I think he knows." His

satisfaction doesn't last. The tight feeling in his stomach is much more enduring. "Do you really think we can get them out of this mess?"

He looks back at her. "Has Shirase met any leaders? Or told you anything else that could be important?"

"He said that they don't have any leaders. That they keep saying that they're all equal or some bullshit like that."

"Then who the hell makes their decisions for them?" Chuuya wonders aloud with a frown. There has to be someone.

"God, apparently," Yuan mutters.

"I doubt god would approve of cutting into people and torture them for something they have no control over."

"Don't ask me. I've never been into religion."

"Yeah," he says, "me neither."

The glaring hypocrisy in every single one of their actions is hard to ignore but also not new. Dazai pointed that out to him days ago.

Sighing, Chuuya covers his eyes with one arm. "It won't be easy but we have Dazai working on our side. If anyone is able to find a way to outsmart these fuckers, then it'll be him."

"Working on your side, you mean," she points out, and even though he can't see her, he can feel the weight of her gaze burning holes into his face.

"Same thing."

"So did you find out then?"

He lifts his arm to raise his brows.

"Why he wants you here?" Yuan gives him that you-know look. "Why he is willing to help out the sheep even though they're technically traitors?"

Chuuya huffs dryly under his breath. "He isn't willing to help. He's just doing it because it makes me owe him a favor."

"Like… a sexual favor?" Yuan grips his arm. "Is that why he –"

“No, relax.” Rolling his eyes, he waves her off. “I’m not whoring myself out to him if that’s what you’re asking.” Well, technically he *did* do that today, but Dazai shot him down, so it doesn’t count. “The favors aren’t that bad. Annoying sometimes, but nothing horrible.”

When he catches a glimpse of Yuan’s expression she looks like she is trying and failing to understand someone else’s inside jokes. “Okay,” she says eventually. “I’m not really following but I don’t have to. So what will you have to do in exchange for helping the sheep?”

Everything but sucking Dazai off, apparently.

“That’s yet to be decided.”

“You two are so fucking strange.”

“It’s not that weird.”

“Trust me, it is,” she reassures him nonchalantly. The lighthearted banter between them is fickle, and too soon the air grows heavy with the weight of their lives again. Yuan’s eyes flicker up to him and down as she chews on her lip--her tell when she’s not sure whether to say something, which is so obvious because it is rare.

“What is it?” he urges.

“What will happen after?”

He doesn’t need her to clarify what she means by after.

His eyes flutter closed, visions of the future fluttering around in his head like doves in the distant sky. “The sheep will get to leave,” he says. “For real this time.”

“And what about you?” she asks.

“I’m no longer part of the sheep,” he answers just as quietly. “They made that obvious when they left.”

“You could talk to them. I’m sure they’ll listen.”

“I’m not going to beg people who don’t want me there anymore to let me go back.” It still hurts. It always will. The same way a scar will always ache when you dig your nails into it, but it will fade with time, too. And getting them out of the Bishop’s staff, giving them a shot of a new chapter in their lives, without any other organizations trying to tell them what to do, is a better ending than the one they got before, a

sudden departure with no goodbyes but an invisible knife in his back. "It's what I should have done from the start," he finally says.

He should have let them go when Dazai gave him a choice.

Not force them to stay in the mafia because *he* wasn't ready to leave just yet.

And not force himself to go just because they weren't willing to wait for him.

He should have given them the freedom to leave and himself the freedom to stay, but instead, he didn't do either and messed everything up.

"I don't want to leave you again," Yuan murmurs next to him. "They're my friends, but you're my person. I shouldn't have to choose between you."

"I know a thing or two about shitty choices…" His joke falls flat, and he's not sure what to offer her, despite his experience with this, so he just pats her arm, a little awkwardly, until Yuan snuggles closer and lies her head on his shoulder.

"This sucks," she murmurs, voice muffled by his shirt.

"I know."

"I hate this."

"I know."

"Stop saying *I know* . Say that it will be alright and that we'll somehow manage to get through this."

He lets out a long breath and closes his eyes. "We'll still see each other. You'll come visit. I will too. And… we'll meet for cigarettes and fries every week." It's not that much of a far-fetched dream. Dazai doesn't like the sheep, but he won't go out of his way to forbid Chuuya from seeing them–and Chuuya wouldn't let that ever happen anyway. He happens to work here now. That doesn't mean the Port Mafia dictates his entire life.

"Think of it this way," he suggests. "It's like we're going to different schools. You know, if we were normal people. We won't be around each other 24/7 anymore, but we'll still get to see each other and it

will be even more fun."

"And what if there's a conflict between you and us? What then?"

"Then I guess I'll owe Dazai a really big favor."

Yuan laughs, but it sounds sad. "I'll make sure it won't ever come to that."

"If anyone can, it's you."

"It will be good."

"Yeah."

"It will be fine."

"I'm sure it will."

***

The next day, Chuuya's morning in his office gets cut short when Gin personally fetches him for an urgent meeting between the mafia's five executives and the boss.

Even though that title has been dangling from his neck for a while now, he's never been part of such a meeting before, let alone in the presence of the other four echelons, and judging by the grave look on Gin's face when he asks them what it's about, it's not to have a chitchat over tea and cookies either.

In the office, there are far more people present than just the five executives, though. Chuuya decides to take the free seat next to Albatross before leaning in to ask, "Do you know what this is about?"

"No," he whispers back, "do you?"

Chuuya shoots him a bewildered frown. "Would I be asking you if I did?"

"You got me there. You really got me there, dude. Anyways, you still up for drinks? Maybe tomorrow?"

Before he can answer, Dazai takes a seat at the head of the long table, and the hushed chatter among his people falls silent without a single beat of hesitation.

“As of this morning, one of our people is officially declared missing.” Behind him, a large photo appears projected onto the wall, showing what looks to be surveillance footage of a young girl with long black hair in traditional clothes. She can’t be older than fifteen years old. “Kyouka Izumi,” Dazai continues. “Most of you will know her as Atsushi-kun’s partner.” Atsushi Nakajima, who is also seated at the table, looks even grimmer than usual. “A possible defection and any other non-violent causes are ruled out. She was last seen exiting the second tower last night at one in the morning. Ever since, it’s like she vanished into thin air.”

Dazai pauses then, his expression steady and yet as sharp as ever. Chuuya finds himself tapping his foot in impatience, craving to know what kind of point the man is leading them all up to even if he already has an idea of what it’s going to look like.

The point comes in the form of a dozen different pictures, every single one of them depicting one brutal murder after another. A crucifixion. Another one. Another one. Another one but of a *child.* And there, above Dazai’s head, the horrid painting of a dead angel with bloody wings. It’s the ability-user that was found when they were in the bar.

Dazai’s voice melts into liquid poison when he speaks again. “But we all already know who is responsible, don’t we?”

“I hate these fuckers,” Albatross whisper-mutters next to him.

Chuuya’s pretty sure everyone in the room can relate. If not before, then sure as hell after the presentation.

“Atsushi-kun,” Dazai orders softly.

The boy gets to his feet and holds his head up high. What’s more intimidating about him is the lifeless stare in his eyes, though, like they’re open, but he’s not really awake, seeing nothing but white emptiness. “They call themselves the Bishop’s Staff, founded towards the end of the great war as a means to protest the government’s use of abilities in battles and conflicts. However, they have radicalized and transformed into an organization with anti-ability leanings ever since. There are no official numbers but based on recent assaults and attacks it’s assumed that their members have doubled in the last year. Eight days ago, they killed a port mafia member and left a message. We strongly believe they are responsible for kidnapping my partner, Kyouka Izumi, as well.”

Dazai cocks his head, his curious look a lethal ruse. “And what will

you do to get her back?"

"Everything," Atsushi says. A moment later, as if remembering his script, he takes a breath and adds, "we're both trained for the case of one of us going missing, and my team and I already started picking up clues that she left behind for us. We're not only going to find Kyouka and get her back but use this occasion to get viable prisoners."

Dazai nods, pleased, but he doesn't say anything else. Chuuya feels the lingering silence grow by the second, something transparent and shapeless growing in the air, until –

"What can we do?" asks a sturdy man with a military haircut. Chuuya's pretty sure that's the executive that goes by the name *Colonel*. "That kind of behavior against the port mafia is unacceptable. Twice in a week and this close to our base? It's bold."

"It's insulting," someone else behind him agrees.

"It's a declaration of war," Kouyou says, the only one brave enough to utter what is going through everyone else's heads. "Isn't it, boss?"

Dazai's smile has an odd air of sadness to it. It makes him look a lot younger, makes him look like an actual twenty-year-old instead of an ancient creature that wound up trapped in a mortal body. "They did leave a dead messenger of god on our doorstep. It sure seems a lot like it."

"And how will we respond?"

"What do you want us to do?"

"What's the plan to crush them, boss?"

And that's when that mouth twists and sharpens, transforming into something hungry, yet no less beautiful. "I want us to kill their god."

From there on, the meeting turns into a succession of rapid-fire commands. The black lizard, a combat assault squad consisting of Hirotsu, Higuchi, and a third member called Tachihara Mitchizou, gets tasked to assist Atsushi. Kouyou and her interrogation unit get a handful of specific targets, most of them politicians or investors that are associated with the Bishop's Staff. Lippmann's job is to establish contact with the Armed Detective Agency while Piano Man's is to gather intelligence.

Last but not least, Dazai turns his attention to Chuuya, and even though he already knows what part he will have to play, for now, his heart still picks up its pace, stumbling in its hurry to either please the man who made him feel really well last night or the man who is going to lead him to war.

“The Bishop’s Staff currently has several other valuable hostages that we, however, will have a direct line to soon thanks to Nakahara’s team, who will also extract them. Colonel, you will assist in their recovery.”

Chuuya doesn’t miss the flash of hostility in the Colonel’s eyes, clearly not having expected to do that when asked the boss for orders. As long as he does his job though, Chuuya doesn’t mind if the other executive likes him or not. There are far more important things at stake than his reputation.

“And remember,” Dazai says in the end, “even if Kyouka Izumi gets back, or even if you fail and she doesn’t, this conflict won’t end with her. The reason she is missing in the first place is her ability, and they will go after every single one of us next. It will only end when one side is completely eradicated. Let it be theirs.”

With that, Dazai dismisses his people. The room erupts into a flurry of scraping chairs, hurried exits, and low murmurs, the sound of war drums echoing through everyone’s hearts.

Chuuya only ever heard stories about world wars spanning across entire continents, having no memories of the years that the last one took place over, and he wonders if the people back then felt like this, too. A heady mix of adrenaline spiked with pure terror. The scale of the conflict isn’t comparable obviously, but still. The Port Mafia is a gigantic organization. So is the Bishop’s Staff.

The Colonel marching straight towards him yanks Chuuya’s attention back to the present. “We’ll meet in my office to discuss that mission of yours in an hour. Don’t be late.”

“Sure.”

“It’s still *sir* for you,” the executive in all seriousness barks out.

Chuuya’s eyes narrow. “ *Sure.”*

The only reason no blood is spilled is the black-clad mafiosi who appears by the man’s side, her face twisted in oozing distress.

“Colonel-san, I have a question.” He stares Chuuya down for another second or so before giving it up and letting the woman lead him out of the office with the last remaining people.

Even Gin slips out and closes the door behind them.

“Making friends already, I see.”

Gulping down a breath, Chuuya half-turns so he can lean against the desk and shoot Dazai a flat stare in reply. “If I’m going to work here, I’m not going to let someone who’s already made up his mind about me bitch me around and demand respect that he hasn’t even earned from me.”

“The Colonel was in the military before he joined the mafia,” Dazai tells him with a knowing smile. “Very conservative and hierarchical, but decent in the field. He also thinks the alliance with the king of the sheep was an epic mistake.”

It figures that just because Dazai agreed to help, he won’t make it enjoyable or easy for him.

“Wow,” Chuuya lets out a dry snort, crossing his arms. “So is that your punishment?”

“Don’t be naïve, Chuuya. I’m more creative than that and you know it.”

“And what did your creative mind come up with then?”

The corner of Dazai’s mouth curves and Chuuya swears he can feel the air grow static with electricity. “I will let you choose between two things… because I’m generous like that. Does that sound fair?”

“It sounds like I won’t want to choose either,” Chuuya mutters with a shrug, “but sure, go ahead.”

“Option A,” Dazai announces, slowly sauntering closer and closer to him, “you put on a maid dress and clean my office–while wearing it, of course.”

The world stills. Static noise fills his head. Chuuya blinks a few times before gathering enough spit in his mouth to hiss, “Are you serious?”

“You won’t find anyone more serious than me.” Pausing a foot away from him, Dazai cocks his head. “Problem?”

“What happened to not using sex as punishment?”

“Who said anything about sex? I want you to clean my windows, not my –”

“Oh, come on,” Chuuya growls out. “As if you’d ask for –” His mouth closes, opens, and then clamps shut again as he thinks past this ridiculous request and what that must leave him with as his other choice. Most likely something less humiliating but something he won’t want to do anyway.

Jaw clenched, he meets Dazai’s amused gaze. “What’s option B?”

“You don’t take part in getting the sheep out once the time comes for that. You do what you can from here, you come up with a foolproof plan to convince the little lambs to be smart for once, but you let the Colonel do the rest.”

This time, any sense of rational thinking abandons him as Chuuya’s brows tug into a furious scowl. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me.”

Dazai’s smile disappears as well.

Nope, not a joke either.

“That makes no sense,” he snaps. “The entire plan *is* me. Do you honestly believe the sheep will trust another stranger offering a lending hand? Again?”

“You think it’s the only plan that could work but there are a dozen other ones that would work just as well. You don’t need to be there for it to be successful.”

“I do!”

But Dazai doesn’t even indulge him in an argument. “Well, you have another choice if that’s your opinion.”

“The other choice sucks!”

Wearing a dress for a mission was one thing. Chuuya would always put the lives of others over his own comfort and pride, but this? This isn’t about tactics or strategy or smart thinking. It’s about Dazai knowing that the idea of prancing around in a stupid maid dress and cleaning his damn office makes the temperature of his blood escalate

to dangerous levels. Dazai knows it, so of course, he will exploit it to steer him away from *this* option and towards the other.

Except the other one is also unacceptable.

Not because it's embarrassing or because Chuuya believes the mission will fail without him being there. Dazai wouldn't lie about that, wouldn't endanger the sheep even now. But because it robs Chuuya of the chance to rewrite their ending.

He's not foolish enough to believe that the sheep will forgive and forget once everything's over, that they will run back to him with open arms and pretend like the last few months didn't happen. At the very least, though, he wanted them to know that he never stopped caring. He wanted to show them that they didn't have to be scared of him.

"I never said I was nice," Dazai chirps.

"Fuck you," Chuuya snarls, stabbing a finger against his chest before he aggressively pushes past him. "I hope you choke on your spit next time you open your damned mouth."

"Where are you going?"

"I have a meeting in an hour!"

"But what's your verdict?" Dazai calls after him.

Chuuya's only answer is his middle finger as he stalks out of the office.

***

After a grueling hour of exchanging basic information with the Colonel–half of which the man spent questioning Chuuya's loyalty once he found out the hostages are none other than the sheep, he closes the door of his apartment behind him. His stomach has been growling–very loudly–for a while now, he needs to prepare Yuan for another meeting with the Colonel, *and*…

And there is the other thing now.

"There you are," Yuan says, appearing in a hoodie she must have stolen out of his closet. "I've been thinking about how to best approach the sheep again, but I really need those resources that your

boyfriend promised me."

Chuuya only scowls at the blatantly wrong use of that term for that bastard. Dazai is anything but a boy and a friend. He's a sadistic man who is an enemy. A manemy, if you will. "I've got us resources," he mutters on his way to raid the kitchen. "They come with an annoying executive who thinks we're about to betray the mafia at any given minute, but I've got them."

He sees Yuan make a face. "Is that going to be a problem?"

"Nah, it'll work. I'll tell you everything later but first…" The inside of the fridge is a good place to pointedly stare at as he searches for the right words.

When he doesn't find them, Yuan asks, "First what?"

Chuuya closes the fridge again. "First you have to help me with something."

"I got that much. Are you going to tell me with what?"

There really is no need to drag it out further than necessary.

"Youhavetohelpmefindamaiddress." The words come out all in one breath, leaving no space for any pauses and hesitations, and Chuuya punctuates it by slamming his forehead against the door of the fridge, hoping it will cool the heat that has risen to his face.

For a moment, there is a whole lot of nothing. Only the steady hum against his temple.

Then he hears Yuan clear her throat. "I'm not sure I understood correctly. Help you find a… maid dress?"

Still refusing to look at her, Chuuya nods.

"Can I know what it's for?" To his surprise, her voice is mostly curious, a bit amused, but nowhere near as mocking as he imagined it to be.

He finally tilts his head to look at her in misery. "Remember how I said that I owe Dazai a favor now?"

Her right brow raises skeptically. "That's the favor?"

He nods.

“You know, that sounds a lot like whoring yourself out, and you specifically –”

“Trust me, I know how it sounds.” He rubs his brow and then leans against the fridge, shrugging weakly. “It’s not about that, though. I think.” A sigh leaves him. “It’s about Dazai being an ass and making a point because it’s either wearing a fucking maid dress or staying out of the mission to get the sheep out.”

Yuan’s face falls. “Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“I know I came to you for help, but you don’t have to be there in person. As long as the sheep get out, that’s all that matters.”

But it’s not.

“Of course I have to be there,” he says. “That’s our friends we’re talking about.”

“I think the point Dazai’s trying to make is that it could be a trap. For you.”

“I don’t care. If that’s what Dazai’s worried about, then he’ll just have to come up with a double trap for them instead. And you –” Sliding his hands into the pockets of his slacks, he jerks his chin towards her, “— only have to worry about finding me a damned maid outfit or something because the only way I’m not going to be there is over my dead body.”

Yuan nods and a few beats pass before she cracks a grin. “That man really does know how to make a point, huh?”

“Shut up.”

***

Later that night, Chuuya finds himself back in the elevator, *always* the damn elevator, jostling his foot up and down as he waits for the doors to open. A thick, black coat is draped over the length of his body, one that he hasn’t felt the need to wear before because the weather has been kind enough for light jackets, even at night. He still doesn’t need it, especially when the hallway that he strides down will take him to an office with the perfect room temperature. No, the coat is for something else.

Chuuya didn't bother to announce his visit, half-hoping the guards stationed at the door will send him away. Instead, they take one glance at him and at the ID card dangling from his neck and allow him to step in.

Great.

Just wonderful.

Dazai's at his desk, poured over a stack of files, though his gaze drifts up to Chuuya as he comes to stand a safe distance away, armed with nothing but the glare that's etched into his face.

Dazai takes note of the coat, yet he still cocks his brow. "Well? Have you decided then?"

"Don't act like you don't already know," Chuuya sneers and folds his arms over his chest. "I bet you already knew the moment I walked out earlier."

"Aren't you always telling me to stop being so presumptuous?"

"You…" Biting down the plethora of insults begging to spill out of him, Chuuya closes his eyes and takes a few deep breaths for patience and strength. The angrier he gets, the more Dazai enjoys this. That's what it's about. Getting a rise out of Chuuya for choosing the sheep over the mafia again–or rather the sheep over himself.

"Just shut up," he mutters, fingers working on unbuttoning the coat. "Don't you dare *laugh*, bastard."

When the coat comes off and reveals the puffy, frilly but surprisingly comfortable maid costume underneath, Dazai doesn't laugh.

Much worse, his one eye rakes over his body like a black hole that consumes everything in its path: air, logic, rationality, and even irritation. He devours Chuuya.

"Don't look like that either." He's disappointed in himself when his raspy voice becomes the physical evidence of Dazai's ridiculous effect on him.

His gaze drags up to meet Chuuya's. "Like what?"

"Like you've seen me naked," he mutters and gestures at Dazai to cut off the topic he brought up himself. "So, here you fucking go. I did it.

Consider my end of the deal done. Can I go now?"

Dazai lets out an amused laugh as he laces his hands behind his neck, not even trying to hide the way his eye keeps sliding up and down his body. "The choice was to clean my office while you're at it, Chuuya darling. So –" His hand gestures towards Chuuya. "— go on. It looks clean in here, but that's just superficial. You'll find a lot of dirt if you look close enough."

"I don't need to look for it when the dirt is sitting right here."

"Well, clean me up then."

Chuuya exhales through his nose. "Only way to clean mold like you is total extermination."

"Harsh," Dazai comments idly, still grinning like the Cheshire cat personified. "But you can try. If anyone could, it would probably be Chuuya."

"Well, Chuuya wants to go home and take a shower, so how about you stop chit-chatting and just tell me where your cleaning supplies are?"

"Oh, didn't I say? There aren't any here."

"Then how do you expect me to do this shit? With my hands?"

"Chuuya should have thought about that before showing up empty-handed. That's bad form, you know."

"No, *you* should have provided me with cleaning supplies! You're bad form!"

"A good maid would have come prepared."

With a low growl in the back of his throat, Chuuya throws up his hands, annoyed that the bastard not only actually wants him to clean but that he makes it ten times harder, too. Even whoring himself out would have been easier than that.

"Here," he ends up muttering as he stalks over to Dazai and starts stacking files on top of each other. "I'm decluttering your desk."

"I was working on that," the bastard points out even though he doesn't lift a single finger to stop him. Instead leaning back and watching.

Chuuya ignores him and continues shaping his mess into tinier, neater messes. The edge of a document peeks out from one of the folders, what looks to be a photograph, the same one Dazai presented to his people this morning.

“You think they’ll find her?” he asks since this seems to be as good a time as any. “That girl?”

“They don’t have to.”

Chuuya doesn’t stop working but his movements become slower as he thinks. “They were too late?” She was only –

“No, because the kidnapping was planned,” Dazai says instead.

Now, Chuuya pauses, eyes fluttering. “Huh?”

“Yuan’s information confirmed that they test ability-users. We needed an in.” A shrug. “Easiest way to do that is to let them think they got the upper hand by stealing a shy, little girl who happens to have an ability.”

“She’s so young.” It’s not an accusation, not really. Just a terrible observation.

A fourteen-year-old girl was deliberately given to people who will do awful things to her. Double mission or not.

Dazai’s gaze is surprisingly earnest when he says, “they always are.”

Chuuya glances down at his hands again, not doing much of anything anymore because Dazai’s desk wasn’t that messy, to begin with.

“But Kyouka is excellent,” Dazai adds, breaking through the hollow silence in his head. “And we’ve kept an eye on her from the second she left the building.”

“Why did you lie to the others then?”

“Because people forget what it’s like to lose when they’ve been doing good for too long. Kyouka, a fourteen-year-old girl with an ability, is the living, breathing reminder of what the Bishop’s Staff wants to take from them.”

“So she’s motivation,” Chuuya concludes wryly.

“That’s one way to say it.”

It might be unethical–oh, it's definitely unethical, but he can see the diabolically genius logic behind it. Knowing that someone's out to get you, and knowing that someone has already gotten one of you, someone who's the picture definition of innocence, are two different things. It brings the conflict right to their doorstep, and does not let them avert their gazes.

It plays to their emotions. It gives them something concrete to fight for. Something to die for even.

"And?" Chuuya looks at him. "Do we have an in?"

Dazai responds with a slow smile. "Of course, we have an in."

And that's brilliant, too.

Perhaps that is what Chuuya lacked as a leader of the sheep: a ruthless vision that allows Dazai to give up certain battles to win the war, to move his people around the way he seems fit, and to be both their tyrant and their saint.

Chuuya could have never put any of the sheep in danger because he loved them too much to risk their well-being for a victory. While that doesn't make him a bad friend, it did make him a bad leader. And he tried to be both, to love them and to lead them, but the only thing it did was make them hate him.

What they needed after Shirase's arrest was someone to give them clear instructions, rally their hearts around a common cause, and keep them busy with a goal to run towards. Instead, they got Chuuya, who was too focused on the targets Dazai had set up for him to realize that he was letting his own people drift.

It didn't matter that Chuuya was doing it to gather the information so he could cut them loose eventually. It didn't matter that he had good intentions. It didn't matter that he went to sleep thinking of the sheep at night.

In the end, he failed to be their leader and ended up losing them as his friends, too.

Chuuya's eyes flutter to Dazai and back to the desk. Sliding a few pens aside, he murmurs, "So we'll be even more prepared to get the sheep out?"

"Well, Kyouka's at a different facility, but the information that we

now have thanks to her will be useful, yes."

"Good." His fingertips draw over the edge of the desk as Chuuya slowly walks around it. "That's good."

Dazai being Dazai doesn't bother to make some room for him but that's fine. Space is the last thing Chuuya wants right now.

It was a clever move to make him choose between bending to Dazai's whims or saving the sheep from a distance only, but just like Dazai said himself not too long ago: Chuuya is learning quickly. Two can play this game.

Chuuya does so by bending over the desk, pretending to reach for the tiny box of flash drives that he knows he keeps there. And if that lets the hem of his maid dress ride up to reveal the bare skin of his thighs, a flash of his ass cheek even… well, then that's just an unfortunate work accident. One, that Dazai gets to see from up close, basically thrust into his face.

There's the sound of an inhale behind him, heavier than usual, almost a sigh. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Hm?" Lazily inspecting the USB flash drives, Chuuya shoots him a coy glance over his shoulder. "I'm checking whether your things need to be dusted." He lifts one of the memory sticks and blows on it, making his lips nice and plum. "Since you didn't provide me with any cleaning supplies, I have to resort to other means like, you know, my mouth."

"Obviously," Dazai echoes, pinning him with a wary but starved stare. "How resourceful of you."

Chuuya agrees with a hum, holding onto his innocent smile for a second longer before he not-so-innocently lets his eyes trail over Dazai and his body until he pauses between his thighs. "Found something," he says and promptly spins around to drop to his knees, brushing the imaginary dust off Dazai's crotch with his fingertips. "What did you do to get so dirty, Dazai?"

Looking down at him, Dazai slowly shakes his head. "You're an awful actor."

"Then how come you're still alive?" Chuuya asks, his hand stilling to simply rest on Dazai's groin. Not pushing, but there is not a single doubt in his mind that Dazai is hyper-aware of the touch.

Still the man somehow musters up an lofty grin. “Letting me live is not acting but the opposite. It’s you being selfish.”

Their eye contact is too intense to let any cracks like an irritated glare shine through.

“Well,” he keeps his voice deliberately light, “lying is much easier than being honest. I like it more when it’s hard.”

“Hard, huh?”

“Challenging,” he corrects himself even though his hand practically feels Dazai rising to his demand. Getting hard.

“Well, if you’re so honest,” Dazai murmurs, bringing his fingers to Chuuya’s face, stroking the curve of his chin before he tilts it up. “Why don’t you tell me what you want right now?”

Want?

This isn’t a matter of want but a game. Dazai thinks he’s got it all: Chuuya on his knees, wrapped up like a toy for him in this god-forsaken maid dress, and about to demonstrate just how resourceful he is at using his mouth. But.

But he was right that Chuuya was just desperate to suck him off, and little does he know that it’s all that he’s going to get. This, and nothing more. And it will be *Chuuya* who will go home tonight as the one who played and who won. Chuuya. Not him.

“I want…” Chuuya’s fingers trail over the seam of his slacks, getting tighter with each brush. “… to make you come. Like this.”

Dazai’s eye flashes at him. And then: “Well, what are you waiting for then? Go on.”

Hearing the permission to continue, Chuuya has to breathe deeply to keep the excitement at bay, a buzzing livewire cursing down his stomach through his blood and into his fingers as they work open the zipper. There is something primally satisfying about giving. Giving to *Dazai.*

In the end, impatience gets the best of him, and Chuuya practically shoves his hand under the black boxer briefs. Only when he cups Dazai’s dick, fingers wrapping around the half-hard length of it, does he slow down, eyes flickering up to meet the dark gaze staring down

at him. Dazai's pupils are huge, eclipsing the shades of mars-brown, but there is a surprisingly tender gleam in there too. One that makes Chuuya look away after fingers brush his hair aside as if kneeling in front of someone to suck them off isn't a big deal but seeing something other than just lust in their expression is too much.

He doesn't let the moment of weakness linger. There is something he's been wanting to get his hands, his *mouth*, on for a long time now, and wasting any more time would be stupid.

Shifting, Chuuya makes a fist around his cock and slowly drags it up, squeezing him a little when he feels him twitch. His gaze can't help but find Dazai's again as he leans closer to drag his tongue over the tip, swirling around it and dipping into the slit. Chuuya keeps slowly stroking up and down, then presses his mouth closed where it's been mapping out a pulsing vein and sucks, letting saliva escape and dribble down until it meets his fist.

Dazai sighs, a deep, satisfied sound, that ignites the desire to hear more like a single match starting a forest fire.

Chuuya's fingers tighten ever so slightly to hold him in place as he slides his lips back up and brushes them over his tip like he would when kissing someone, kissing Dazai, before opening his mouth to finally, finally take his cock into his mouth.

A moan reverberates through him as skin and flesh fill him; he gives a self-indulgent suck, working his hand around the base at the same time, and when that earns him even the barest hint of a groan from above, his eyes flutter closed.

"Have been thinking about this for a long time, haven't you?"

Heat floods his face. Chuuya whines, torn between feeling humiliated and turned on because yes, yes, he has; he has imagined this exact scenario more times than he cares to admit.

"I know, sweetheart, I know," Dazai murmurs and brings his hand back into play, the tender way he cups Chuuya's cheek at odds with the mocking tone of his words. "Open your mouth a little wider." His thumb traces the lips that are stretched around his cock. "I know you can do better than that."

And that should not only be mortifying but derisive. It's Chuuya's show and he decides how he wants to run it. Yet the only thing he responds with is an indecipherable grumble as he already works his

jaw muscles open to allow more of Dazai's cock in, listening to his stupid orders anyway.

It's kind of hot.

Not because Chuuya likes being bossed around but because Dazai always makes a challenge out of it, putting tempting dares into his orders that make it hard not to rise to the bait, and then rewarding him with an odd sense of accomplishment that he is only ever able to get with him. From *him*.

The very least thing Chuuya can do to keep a sliver of dignity is keep his expression halfway sober and irritated, even though Dazai's fingers are like steel around his chin and his hips are slowly pushing forward into his mouth.

It's a doable rhythm, deep, making his eyes sting, but slow–so slow that even Chuuya's own pace would be more brutal than this. But it's also nice. Heat clings to every centimeter of his body, his abs clench every time he meets Dazai's intoxicating gaze, and he can already feel his jaw muscles grow sore.

"That's it, love," Dazai says, letting his fingers slide down to his neck instead. "Such a good boy for me."

His eyelids flutter in surprise, his throat too when he swallows, and Dazai tosses his head back, cursing softly under his breath.

That sound goes to his core like a bolt of heat, and for a moment, Chuuya's tempted to sneak a hand between his legs and touch his own dick, just to relieve the maddening pressure. But somewhere, outside the heady fog in his head, there was a point to doing this instead of letting Dazai fuck him, and he will be damned if he abandons his mission now.

What he fails to consider at that moment is that Dazai rarely ever lets anything slide, never fails to miss anything, so he doesn't anticipate him to skid his foot under the dress and press right against the neglected bulge in his briefs.

Chuuya chokes, throat closing up and vision blurring with the sting in his eyes. Chest heaving, he pulls off, coughing a few times into his hand and then grabbing Dazai's ankle to stop his fucking movements. His voice sounds ruined when he snaps, "knock it off" through clenched teeth at the smug bastard above him.

“I’m just looking out for you.” Dazai’s innocent hum doesn’t match the lecherous smirk on his face at all, especially when he struggles against Chuuya’s hold in his quest to rub him off. “Chuuya deserves to feel good too. What’s so wrong with that?”

What’s wrong is that this is a game, and Chuuya intends to win.

“I’m feeling perfectly fine without your help,” he mutters back and gives one last attempt at pushing Dazai’s foot away before resettling between his thighs and wrapping his hand around his cock again. He’ll just have to ignore it then. It’s manageable.

Amused, Dazai watches him wrap his lips around his cock, keeping up a consistent suction as he works his way lower and lower. “I bet I can make you come first,” he announces when Chuuya’s mouth meets his own fist.

That bastard…

It’s no surprise this time that Dazai’s foot becomes more insistent, managing to blindly find the perfect pace and spot to grind against to make Chuuya’s hips stutter involuntarily. But as distracting as it is, it won’t make Dazai race to the finish line first. Chuuya’s not a tween anymore who gets off after three strokes, and definitely not against someone’s damned foot. He’s got stamina.

And there’s nothing like a challenge to bring out the best of him.

He doubles down, taking Dazai even deeper, but also becoming messier. Though judging by the way the man’s eyes zero in on him every time he gasps wetly around his cock and catches his own spit with his fist for the next stroke, that’s not a bad thing at all. Ignoring the stubborn and unfairly good pressure against his own dick, Chuuya focuses on all the little things that make Dazai’s breath hitch and flutter, teasing his cockhead, flicking his wrist on the upstroke, humming around him, and he’s confident that it won’t be long now when –

Bzzzzzzzzz.

The phone that’s in Dazai’s pocket starts vibrating, so close to Chuuya’s face and the cock in his mouth that it would probably feel good if it were a tiny bit closer. As it is, it’s only another stupid distraction that Dazai will hopefully be smart enough to ignore.

Of course, Chuuya finds himself wrong.

Dazai has the audacity to fish out his phone, press it to his ear, and stroke his thumb over Chuuya's cheek in a wordless command to *continue*. "Yes?"

Chuuya glares daggers at him, but he doesn't even get a reaction! Dazai listens to whoever is on the other line, eyes trailing somewhere up and to his right, like Chuuya isn't currently down there with his fucking dick in his mouth.

"I see," Dazai murmurs. "How unfortunate. What's their offer?"

Humming in irritation, Chuuya pulls off to take a quick breather before diving down again, so deep that he feels tears prickle at his eyes that are worth it when Dazai's thighs quiver under his palm. The foot rubbing him off comes back too and Chuuya's not sure whether it's relief or frustration that drags out the garbled whine from the bottom of his soul, his hips chasing it with a desperate grind forward.

He's still keeping his promise to himself, still going to win–even if this particular victory comes with a loss as well. He just – it --

It feels so *good* after all the teasing.

Then there is Dazai, fingers coiling in his hair not to push but to keep a slice of control, even while he's on the phone.

And Chuuya is losing his mind.

"That's not going to be –" A flash of Dazai's midriff, revealed by a ridden up patch of shirt, jerks when Chuuya moans around him, both the punishment for neglecting him and a desperate attempt to stop it and hearing Dazai having to clear his throat in the middle of his sentence is the most satisfying thing in the world, better even than getting to rut against his foot. "That's not going to be a problem," Dazai manages to say, a gratifyingly odd pitch to his voice. "Be so kind as to repeat the last two points again."

Chuuya is just about ready to throw hands with him when he slides the phone back into the pocket, *Gin's* voice is suddenly on speaker as they talk about profit margin and turnover and other irrelevant things that get drowned out by far more important noises.

"You don't have a single ounce of patience inside you, huh?" Dazai breathes out, turning his attention back to him, but the reprimanding tone falls flat when the last syllable bleeds into a hiss. " *Jesus* , Chuuya." And then – "Fuck, like that, just like that, I'm…"

Everything after that isn't comprehensible enough, but it's not hard to guess what he's trying to say with the tugging on Chuuya's hair, whether it's another command or a desperate question. He chases Dazai's orgasm until the very last moment, before pulling almost all the way off with wet heaving breaths, lips still engulfed around the tip as his hand jerks him off to completion.

One, two, three strokes later and Dazai's coming with a grunt. His cum smears against Chuuya's lips , the drops that his tongue doesn't lap up fast enough dribbling down his chin. He only stills his hand when Dazai's foot gives his thigh a warning tap.

Eyes fluttering up, Chuuya takes in the state he's in: chest heaving, face a bit slack-jawed, and cheeks adorably flushed, and decides that he enjoys the picture too much not to make it even worse. He doesn't touch his cock, just wraps his lips back around it to make sure he got all of it, every last drop, his mouth trying to smile when he feels Dazai's flesh twitch in response, empty but so, so sensitive.

"You menace," Dazai hisses, curling his hand in his hair to drag him off.

Chuuya laughs, hoarse and smug. "What was that about me coming first?"

"That was for motivation," Dazai replies because of course he can't let him have his win just this once. "And I'll make up for it with –"

"Boss?"

Chuuya blinks at the source of the voice: the pocket with the phone that he completely blended out in the last few minutes, only noticing that Dazai is trying to pull him up when a hand tugs at his wrist.

"Boss…? Are you there?"

Dragging a stumbling Chuuya, whose thighs are half-numb from kneeling on the floor for so long, on his lap, Dazai simultaneously finds his phone and brings it back to his ear. "Yes, yes, I'm here, Gin. All of that sounds good. Send me the contract as soon as you have them."

"What about –"

"Talk to you later!"

It's funny that Dazai was willing to torture himself by accepting the call in the first place but not patient enough to finish the conversation when he wants to do whatever it is that he thinks he has planned for Chuuya on his lap. He almost comments on it, but Dazai's faster, bringing his mouth to Chuuya's jawline and sliding his palm under the ruffled dress.

"Now what am I going to do with you?"

His pleasure that has been mostly on the backburner for now--the fucking grinding doesn't count--mounts so fast that Chuuya gets dizzy, head tossing back as Dazai locates every single patch of sensitive skin that makes him shiver and exploits it like he's digging for diamonds.

The game, Chuuya desperately reminds him. *Think of the game.*

He lets himself savor all the heady sensations spinning him in circles for a few more moments, Dazai's teeth on his skin, hot breath ghosting over his neck, and his hands squeezing his ass, making him clench around nothing, all of it so, so, so unfairly good.

And then Chuuya prays for the self-discipline of a monk before he pushes himself away with two palms against Dazai's chest. "Nothing," he rasps out, trying to catch his breath. "You will do…" It's so *hot* in here. "… nothing."

Eyes narrowing, Dazai pauses, but he doesn't take his hands away either. "Nothing?" he echoes.

Chuuya gives him a few more nods than necessary. "Yup… Nothing."

"And why, pray tell, would I do that?" Dazai's fingers tighten again, then they push him forward and right into his own crotch, practically rubbing them against each other, as his lips shamelessly attach to Chuuya's neck again.

Chuuya digs his fingers into his arms, gritting his teeth together so he won't do anything as self-sabotaging as moan. "Because –" His hips roll down into a particularly good thrust, not of their volition obviously, making his mouth flutter open and shut. "Because," he tries again, hissing out the words this time, "that'd make you win and I refuse to –" He has to stop in the middle of the sentence and gather his scattered thoughts to finish his speech. "– I fucking refuse to give you this one."

Dazai's chuckle flutters over the pulse point of his neck but it reaches

far deeper than that, through skin and bones and into the center of his heart. “I didn’t realize we were playing.”

“Sounds like a *you problem*.” It would be more convincing if he didn’t say it sitting on Dazai’s lap, allowing him to grind their hips together, and mark his neck like a dog in a rut, but hey, he never claimed to be perfect.

“Explain to me how *I* am losing anything when you were just on your knees for me?” As if to push his memory, even more, he swipes his fingers over Chuuya’s lips, collecting physical evidence and presenting it to him like they’re in court and Dazai’s the law. “You’re contradicting your past words, Chuuya.”

Yeah, yeah, Chuuya did say something that sounded vaguely similar less than two days ago.

“It’s not about what you got out of it,” he manages to say with a more or less steady voice when, for a single heartbeat, their bodies stop moving together, so they can share a single look. “It’s about what you *won’t,* and that’s…” Giving him parodic doe eyes, Chuuya glances down at him, pointedly sliding his gaze all over the uniform clinging to his skin. “… getting to fuck me… or touch me at all in this stupid thing that gets you all cross-eyed.”

Because from what he’s seen so far, it’s less about receiving, and more about giving–or taking in Dazai’s case. He’s greedy that way, savoring every gasp and moan and stuttered breath that he can get, finding the right pressure points to make people shatter, then bend them into whatever shapes he desires like clay, and getting off on the power he holds in his hand when someone trusts him with something as vulnerable as control after he has seduced them into submission.

Dazai is a control freak. Just like Chuuya, except that the trait mostly manifests in two different shades of the same color in both of them.

Mostly.

Although Chuuya can admit that letting go felt better than he ever thought it would, he sometimes finds himself craving to pull out the rug from under someone as well, especially when it’s Dazai that he gets to see stagger to the ground.

Right now, Dazai’s still on his feet, still high on the fact that Chuuya showed up here as his maid at all, and still clutching to every thread of control within his grasp. “And yet here I am,” he murmurs and

draws closer, attempting to even steal Chuuya's god-forsaken air as both his hands make a point to slide over his bare arms, "touching you."

"You and I both know that's not what I meant," he murmurs back.

"Did you mean this then?" Dazai's fingers halt on his hips, then bring him down against his own again, awfully smug when Chuuya automatically grinds forward, enjoying the same pleasure that he is claiming to not give Dazai.

"This?" He sneaks his hand under the dress, cupping his neglected cock through the layer of clothing before tugging it down to touch him. Dazai's fingers feel like liquid flames around him, long, skilled, and dry enough to make the relief come with a sting.

"Or this?" Dazai breathes against his mouth before sealing the words with a kiss. It's his lips, of all things, that make Chuuya almost melt under him, allow him to put his hand through his chest and hold his heart between his fingers, do whatever he wants with it. It would be so easy. But it would also make him weak, and there are a lot of things that are wrong with him, this one isn't it. He savors the taste of Dazai's mouth like a dying breath, doesn't push him away but doesn't chase him back when they part with a slick noise.

Dizzy from all the maddening sensations attacking him from every front, Chuuya rests his forehead against Dazai's, exhaling a raspy laugh. "Still not what I meant."

"Come on, Chuuyaaaaa." And for the first time, he catches a glimpse of what's hiding behind Dazai's mask when he *doesn't* get his perfectly put-together way. It sounds like a brat. "The only one losing anything would be *you* losing an orgasm – *a lot of them.* Do you really want that?" He nuzzles Chuuya's cheek, his jaw, and the curve that leads down to his shoulder. "I could fuck you right here on this desk. You want to take a pass on that just to make a silly point?"

Of course it's silly to Dazai who spends so much of his time making points that he doesn't even register them as something worth savoring.

Chuuya doesn't grant him the pleasure of a reply, content to listen to him whine instead.

"I wouldn't even be mean this time," Dazai continues, demonstrating it by making a perfect cage around Chuuya's cock, tight and hot and

wonderful as it drags out as much pleasure as physically possible with each stroke. “I’d make you come as many times as you want.” He leans closer, giving Chuuya’s ear a nip, then a toe-curling suck. “Bend you over the desk, lift the dress, and fuck you until your legs give out. Doesn’t that sound good?”

It does.

It sounds so good that it hurts, a physical ache in the bottom of his stomach.

Still.

“Or maybe you want to do it right here on this chair?” Dazai’s one hand slides down to his ass. “Yeah, bet you do. You’d love to ride me, show off that perfect stamina and fuck yourself silly, wouldn’t you?” His other palm cups Chuuya’s face, forcing him to refocus his blurred vision. “Why deny yourself something you want?”

“Because you want it more than I do. Isn’t that what you said?”

“Different scenario,” Dazai quickly brushes off.

“Same scenario,” Chuuya grits out. “You were punishing me for making you help the sheep. *I* am punishing you for trying to force me away from the sheep *again.”*

For some reason, that makes some of the rationality return to Dazai’s glazed eyes, some of the fog sharpening. He doesn’t pull away, but his hands slow down in their ministrations. “Didn’t I tell you that I wasn’t punishing you?”

“No, you said you wouldn’t use sex as a currency, but *not* letting me blow you was a punishment in itself, so you were lying!”

“The only reason why I didn’t let you was because I didn’t want you to think of it as currency.” And then, a little slower, Dazai adds, “if I want to have sex with you, it’s because I want to, and if you ask to suck me off, then I want you to do it because you want to, not because you feel like it’s a price you have to pay.”

Now Chuuya is the one blinking. “That’s not why I wanted to do it! I just…” He lets out an aggravated breath. “I suggested it because I did want it.”

“That’s not what you said.”

“You didn’t exactly explain the logic behind your actions either.”

Dazai purses his lips in defeat. For a moment, they’re both silent.

Somewhere in the back of his head, Chuuya is still aware of the places Dazai is touching, and how much fraught pleasure is still swirling around in his stomach, waiting to be released, but the conversation has muted these feelings and put them in the background for now.

“So you weren’t punishing me,” he summarizes after a moment. “You just didn’t want me to think that you’d be punishing me with sex?”

“You make it sound so complicated.”

“Everything you do *is* complicated.”

“Then let’s make it easy,” Dazai suggests as his fingers move to squeeze the flesh between them. “What do you want?”

He probably doesn’t expect Chuuya to press his hand against his chest and softly keep him at a distance.

Dazai’s eyelids flutter, his mind going through all possible calculations and conclusions before he forces the question marks out of his gaze and lets go of him.

The loss of his heat is the only reason why Chuuya manages to draw away even further, force his thighs out of their position on his lap, and more or less stumble to his feet, his ability helping him stand upright.

“I don’t want it to be a currency either,” he eventually says. “And if we did this, it would be.”

“But it’s a punishment?”

“No. Yes.” Driving a hand through his hair, Chuuya sighs. “It was supposed to be, but not anymore. It’s… I don’t have a right metaphor for this.”

“You can just say what you mean.”

“Well, I don’t have the words for it either.”

“Or don’t,” Dazai says, his voice thin and unusually perplexed.

Chuuya picks up his coat from the ground. When he looks at Dazai, nothing really comes to him except awkward silence. He clears his

throat. “Good night, Dazai.”

He doesn’t get an answer.

The walk down the hallway and the elevator ride is lonely. It’s not that he thinks that he made the wrong choice in leaving because he did go there with the intent to use sex and himself for *something* and he has the decency to respect Dazai’s wish to *not* do that. It’s the fact that it *feels* wrong. Air gushing out of his lungs like out of a deflated balloon.

He’s back in his coat when he listlessly shoves the key card into the thing to let himself inside. Yuan accompanied him when they went out to look for an outfit, insisting on even following him inside the changing rooms–she even took *pictures* –so that’s not the issue. What he doesn’t want her to see are the blossoming bruises littering his shoulders and neck.

His silent prayer to come home to her sleeping already bursts like a soap bubble when he not only finds Yuan in the living room but Albatross next to her.

For a second, all three of them stare at each other.

“Hey,” Yuan is the first to say, her eyes comically wide. “You’re home… early.”

Chuuya squints. He told her that he would only do what Dazai wanted him to do, get it over with, and then be done. Why did she expect him even later than he already is?

“Dude, you okay? You look rough,” Albatross remarks.

“I’m fine,” he mutters and immediately regrets it when he hears the hoarse pitch of his voice.

Yuan blinks, takes stock of him again, the odd strands of hair sticking out every which way, the bundled up coat pulled up to hide his neck, his lips still a bit sore… and then her eyes widen. “Oh, you –”

“I’m going to bed,” he announces before she can finish her sentence. Muffled snickering follows him to the bedroom, making him scowl. Since when does Yuan talk to Albatross anyway?

He forgets quickly as he enters his bathroom, stripping off pieces of clothing as he goes, before stepping into the shower. At first, he turns

the water to a hot pleasing temperature, but when his neglected and abandoned orgasm makes itself noticeable, he changes it to something cooler.

It doesn't help.

He tries to jerk off and relieve some of the pressure. It doesn't help.

Maybe it's the knowledge that two of his friends are somewhere in the apartment.

Or maybe it's because it's not enough. He needs more. Not his hand. Not even his own fingers. Not anything that he has here.

What he wants is Dazai.

Just Dazai.

The shower gets turned off as abruptly as it was turned on. Chuuya had the foresight to know he didn't feel like washing his hair, so he pulled it up into a bun. It's matted now, kind of wet and gross, but after slapping some oil that Kouyou once gave him into the strands, it's presentable enough to tie it into a low ponytail. There's another feeling in his stomach now, not agony, not regret, not sadness, not even the ache to get off, but excitement buzzing under his skin. It's good. Not bad.

He slips into his typical work attire, and opens his drawer to retrieve one last necessary item–that Dazai more than likely has himself, in his desk no less--but his office is big, too big, so it's better to have it on hand. Then he's good to go.

Yuan and Albatross are still in the living room, mulling over the iPad between them, but their heads snap up when he crosses them on his way out.

"I thought you were going to bed?"

"Got called in," Chuuya lies.

"Need help?" Albatross asks.

" *No.*"

The elevator takes forever to come and forever to make the trip one miserable floor up, Chuuya's heart and his foot providing a fast, rhythmic background beat the entire time. He's not the tallest man in

the world but his legs are still long and fast so that he's soon back in front of that door and in front of the guards except that they don't let him in immediately, not this time.

"I need to see the boss." He taps his ID card a few times. "Super important."

The guards gaze blankly at him before one eventually lifts their fingers to the earpiece, murmuring quiet words that Chuuya doesn't understand.

So Dazai told them not to let anyone in.

What if *he* is currently having a shower?

Or what if he found someone else to fuck after Chuuya left?

Surely that would take longer to arrange… right?

For a few minutes, nothing happens. It's just Chuuya and the guards standing there in an odd silence, and he can't help but feel like their eyes are more knowing than usual. That they knew exactly what he's here for again less than an hour later. Somehow he doesn't mind. (Somehow it even makes his stomach clench oddly, something perversely hot about the idea of them knowing, or better even hearing… though these doors are far too thick to let any sounds escape from the inside.)

When they do finally seem to receive the order to let him pass, Chuuya swallows. They drag open the doors for him, and he steps inside at the same time as Dazai comes walking down to meet him, wearing an open but curious look on his face when he comes to a halt a few feet away from him.

"Did you forget something?"

Chuuya waits for the doors to close behind them before taking a breath and shaking his head. "No, I just…" Well, he still hasn't found the right words. Maybe he never will. Maybe that's okay. "You know what? Fuck it." With that curse off his tongue, he crosses the distance between them, wraps his hands around the back of Dazai's neck, and reaches up on his tiptoes to kiss him.

He never realized how difficult it is, logistically, to do that when Dazai doesn't lean down first, and for a moment, Dazai doesn't, his surprise apparent on his slack lips. It is as satisfying as it is

intimidating.

But a moment later, the frozen stiffness bleeds out, melts into something liquid and heated as Dazai cups Chuuya's cheek and kisses him back.

Chuuya melts against the body he's arching into until he feels like the physical boundaries burn away, fusing them together, and everything is burning, melting, shattering around him in the best way possible. His chest is heaving when they part, just for one moment, and he has to focus really hard to form words.

"This," he breathes out, meeting Dazai's gaze. "I want this."

The second that Chuuya has to wait for an answer is the longest of his life.

Finally though, Dazai exhales, mouth twitching, and gives him a small nod.

And then it's on.

Chapter End Notes

> Two scenes from this chapter now have a wonderful illustration made by Oxxtoblur! Check them out and give them some (a lot of) love <333
>
> Next up we have:
> - a table
> - a bed
> - and a jacuzzi

Chapter 24: A Gentle Sin

Chapter Notes

Warnings: Explicit sexual content >:)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Cool, long fingers slide up Chuuya’s neck to trace his jaw, dragging his eyes up to meet Dazai’s, smoldering with intensity, and it’s another feeling entirely that takes over his system. The urge to eliminate every speck of space between them, to taste, breathe, and drink the same air so feverish that he’ll burn up and die if he doesn’t get his fix, even the atoms in the air quivering and sputtering with impatience.

Snaking one arm around the back of Dazai’s neck, Chuuya arches back into his personal space, sinking into an intoxicating pool of frosty mint, vanilla, sake, and *Dazai*. His lips are hard and soft at the same time, demanding in the way he sucks on his upper lip but still cooperative enough to let Chuuya control the pace and rhythm of their dance as his other hand slides into Dazai’s curls and he drags him closer until they’re pressed flush from chest to chest and hips to hips, as close as two separate human being can crawl into each other’s skin. The soft groan that slips out of Dazai when he tilts his head just right, finding the perfect angle to brush every sensitive patch of nerves together, makes the room tilt like *for the tainted sorrow* is turning the world on its head. Lungs heaving, Chuuya breaks away, aware that using his ability now is impossible but surprised to find no glow of red around his skin anyway.

Digging his fingers into the collar of Dazai’s shirt for some kind of stability on a ground that feels like it’s riddled with sinkholes, Chuuya kisses him again, and again, and again, all while clumsily pushing Dazai to blindly stagger backward, no idea where they’re going, just that he needs something solid, a surface, anything, *now*.

Their destination comes in the form of a breathless “oof” from Dazai,

one that Chuuya greedily drinks up like it's the last sip of the best wine he's ever tasted, before making himself pull away, scatter-brained, if only to take inventory of their surroundings: a long table and chairs. Right. That's where they are.

"How about…" Dazai murmurs against the corner of his lips, fingers sliding down the slope of his waist and seizing his hipbone to spin them around and nudge Chuuya on the table with a hand on the back of his thigh instead. "Yeah, so much better."

It puts them on at least somewhat more even eye level even though Dazai still has to lean down to brush their lips together, paradoxically gentle and slow compared to the way he seizes Chuuya's chin to hold it in place.

"Lazy bastard," he rasps between kisses, uselessly trying to speed it up by looping his legs around him. "Even… even *now."*

"Not lazy," Dazai's grin is even more infuriating when it slides against his mouth, "just resourceful."

Taking a sharp intake of breath, Chuuya curls his hand in the man's collar and yanks him closer until their foreheads are pressed together. "Kiss me like you actually mean it."

The eyes staring back at him unabashedly twinkle with amusement before they edge ever so closer…except that instead of doing what Chuuya asked him- because why would he, the bastard–Dazai takes a detour to his jaw instead, placing a few kisses there, then sucking his skin into his mouth, making his spine tingle. "First tell me what you want."

"I already told you," Chuuya hisses even as he arches his neck to give Dazai more room to work with, his lips too damn good to resist. "You want a written statement or –" Dazai locates a particularly sensitive spot under his jaw that lets his lungs stutter. "Or… or what?"

"You said you want *this*," Dazai murmurs and pauses to lick and bite at his fluttering pulse point. "Not *how* you want it." Another maddening nibble. "How you want me."

The fingers that Chuuya has tangled in his hair itch to drag him back to his mouth again, but this is Dazai's game now, and the only way to get him to play is to state the damned rules, no matter how annoying it is.

“I don’t know,” is what comes out, half-grumbled, half-whine. “Do whatever you want as long as you actually fuck me this time.”

Dazai comes back to his eye-level to grin at him, brows raised. “Whatever I want? Chuuya, you should know better by now than to say things like that.”

Maybe he should. Maybe though… maybe the danger of giving Dazai the reigns to his body and soul is what he wants. What he needs to let loose every once in a while. Getting his orgasm stolen away from him was frustrating, to say the least, but, fuck, Chuuya has never experienced such a high before like the one when he was finally allowed to come. The closest thing that compares to it is the rush of his ability after not using it for a while, but even that has never reached as deep and has never felt as wildly satisfying and devastating at the same time.

“I said whatever, so I mean it,” Chuuya says, the only version of *for some reason I trust you with his* that he can say without breaking eye contact. “Just don’t –" He breaks off, the words that were about to leave his mouth tasting like cheesy embarrassment.

“Don’t what?” Dazai presses, squinting at him.

Chuuya’s neck prickles and he lets his eyes roam around the office, focusing on everything but the man in front of him. “Just… don’t make it only about me.” He doesn’t have to look at Dazai to know that his mouth curves at the sides, not when the room grows smaller and hotter whenever he does that. Finally, he brings himself to shoot Dazai an unimpressed scowl. “Stop smiling like that! I mean it! All of it was very nice and good, don’t get me wrong, but it should be the same for you, too. This isn’t a one-man show.”

“Need I remind you what you were doing an hour ago?” Dazai asks with his eyes intentionally wide and around, lifting one hand to teasingly stroke his cheek. “On your knees?”

Chuuya huffs out a breath. “That was different.”

“I fail to see how.”

“You couldn’t make it about me because I was sucking you off – even though you still fucking tried. *Different.*”

“Fine, fine,” Dazai gives in. “I promise to be selfish to the core.”

“Not what I –” The *said* gets smothered by the lips that crash down on him, a live demonstration of Dazai’s stupid promise–or maybe his threat–because the man always has to have the last word. But as far as languages are concerned, Chuuya’s fluent in the language of violence, easily matching the bruising tempo of his mouth.

His arms wind around Dazai’s neck as the man drags him closer with his hands on his ass, having to angle him up to grind their hips together but when he does, the kiss breaks, the shudder of their breaths invading the space between them.

“Fuck,” Chuuya curses, already pulling him into another thrust as he blindly grasps at the damn buttons holding Dazai’s shirt together. His fingers, however, are shaking too hard, not with anxiety or fear but with sputtering impatience, to do anything but make him grit his teeth in frustration.

“Need any help?” The words smear against his mouth with a tittering huff that is as aggravating as it is sweet when it blends with a breathy noise as Chuuya shuts him up with a fierce kiss and forgoes manners and etiquette by simply ripping the shirt open with his hands, buttons falling to their feet like fat raindrops. “Or not,” Dazai comments, the grin evident in the shape of his voice, but Chuuya can’t look at it right now, too busy staring at the wide stretch of bare skin he tore free just now.

Well, not exactly *bare* because there are still the bandages, only covering his neck and his forearms, and there is the ink in the form of a snake, its tail crawling out from under the gauze around his neck and dwindling around his left arm while the head, Chuuya presumes, disappears beneath the waistband of his slacks.

He only has a single second to look, to dream of reaching out and feeling skin against skin, because a moment later, both of Dazai’s hands are grabbing his face, kissing him as deeply as if he’s trying to climb inside Chuuya, and all thoughts dissolve into static noise.

Their tongues rub together, so slowly that it elicits a groan from the back of his throat, his fingers aimlessly lifting and falling back to grip Dazai’s half-torn shirt because he can’t think, can’t remember, can’t do anything but shudder and moan. When they part with a slick noise it’s only to breathe, Dazai slotting their mouths back together and sliding his hands under Chuuya’s shirt and over his abs, contracting with each stolen breath until he lifts his hands so Dazai can get it off him. Admittedly, it does not go as smoothly as it would with a loose hoodie

and for a moment Chuuya fears his head is going to get stuck but in the end, it's still less barbarian than his own method of getting someone naked.

Whether it's the exposure to the room, to Dazai, or the way the man buries his face in the crook of his neck, making him squirm, a sea of goosebumps envelops Chuuya, his chest hitching even harder when Dazai curls a finger in his choker and tugs. "Wearing this just for me, huh?"

"Hah?" Chuuya's voice rises only in heat, not in loudness. "You're giving yourself too much –" Dazai sucks his skin into his mouth, one hand sliding over his chest and down to pinch one nipple at the same time, effectively slurring his speech. "Fuck, you're giving yourself too much credit."

"Am I?" Dazai asks with a teasing tone as his lips follow the descent of his fingers. "You could have left it behind when you changed into your clothes. You even took a shower but –"

"Do you pervert have surveillance cameras installed in my bathroom or what?!"

"— you still chose to put it back on." His pleased gaze flickers up to Chuuya. "For me."

"Did not," Chuuya hisses back.

"And I know that you showered because I can smell it on you." As if to demonstrate his point, Dazai presses his entire face into the side of his neck again and takes a deep breath. It is as disturbing as it is morbidly alluring. And it tickles.

With a hand in his mop of hair, Chuuya drags him back so he can properly glare at him. "I wore it because I always do, asshole."

"Then do you want me to take it off?"

Instead of answering, he presses his lips together.

Then again, that is an answer in itself.

To Dazai's credit, he doesn't say *I told you so.* He buries his satisfaction in Chuuya's mouth, replacing his staggered irritation with spine-thrilling need as he teases his lips open only to deny him his tongue, keeping the kisses slow and intentionally tame. Chuuya whines and

the only reason he doesn't keep him there until Dazai gives him what he craves are the fingers that slip over his navel to work on his zipper.

Breathless, he breaks away and slides a hand into his pocket to fish out the lube.

"Ah, how thoughtful of you," Dazai murmurs, tugging his pants down his legs.

Huffing in response, Chuuya raises himself up to help with the process. The shadow of nerves that creeps over him because of their blatant imbalance of nakedness between them gets swallowed by the whirlpool of pleasure opening up in the pit of his stomach when Dazai touches his cock, half-hard and getting harder with each relentless beating of his heart.

"Shit." That growing knot in the depths of his stomach has been tightening for so long now that just the sensation of a tight, hot fist around him is quickly sending him to dangerous heights, especially as Dazai's smoldering gaze searches out his, the eye contact intensifying everything. Though the way he digs his thumb into the slit of Chuuya's cock, smearing droplets of pre-come down his length until it's slick doesn't help matters either.

"Dazai," he rasps out, hips bucking up to meet his movements, fingers scrambling to hold onto the crumpled shirt half-hanging off his arm.

The sound of a bottle cap popping open cuts through the fog of blistering impatience and desperation; his eyes greedily follow the way Dazai slows his fingers around his dick to squeeze out a generous amount of lube over both. It's a shocking mix of sensations: the lube cold, sterile, but everything about watching it slick up the length of his cock before Dazai releases him to thoroughly coat three of his fingers in it is maddeningly *hot*. So is the way these fingers slide down his body until they find his entrance, tracing the puckered flesh. Chuuya's thighs automatically part for him before one long finger sinks inside.

His lips fall open around a breathless inhale and Dazai seizes it as an opportunity to invade every other space of his body as well, crushing their mouths together and pushing his tongue inside as his finger probes his walls. Torn between kissing him back or focusing on the satisfying sensation of being stretched open, he ends up tangling a hand in Dazai's hair instead, so he can lift his thighs and wrap them around Dazai's torso, fight for whatever control he can get.

Being the dirty player that he is, Dazai doesn't let that sit for long, amping up the tension with a second finger and angling them just right to –

Biting back a moan, Chuuya presses his face into his shoulder and digs both his nails and his heels into Dazai to intensify the force of the truths, to make him do that again, but the world teeters and shifts when a hand suddenly grips his jaw, thumb forcing his mouth open. "That's not going to cut it, Chuuya. I want to *hear.*"

"Maybe if you –" His eyes momentarily flutter closed with a jab at his prostate. "— if you properly fucked me, you would," he growls back, knowing that he's playing with fire but too addicted to the pleasure-pain that it shoots down his spine whenever he comes too close to the scalding flames to stop himself.

The hold around his jaw turns harsher, sending tinges of discomfort through his face, but the two fingers make up for it by picking up a rhythm that is quick and perfect. Maybe it's because Chuuya can't hold it back any longer, maybe it's the fulfillment of his condition, but when his chest starts hiccupping with the sudden rush of blood to his head, he throws back his head and moans, so loud that he's sure the guards outside the doors hear him.

Dazai's hand softens, his thumb stroking over his lips before he kisses him again, all but swallowing the very sound he worked so hard to coax out of him just now. Chuuya squirms with the onslaught of sensations, then Dazai adds a third finger and he loses the ability to even kiss him back, not as he tries to meet his thrusts, making them faster, harder, deeper. But no matter how much his muscles shake and shudder to keep up with the rhythm and chase the pleasure up to the peak like a starving man, Dazai never gives him quite enough to actually get there, only enough to drive him insane.

That doesn't make the broken whine that rips out of Chuuya's throat any less quiet when his fingers slow down to an agonizing rhythm, just massaging his prostate. "Stop," he half-hisses, half-begs, clutching his arm. "I need – Just –"

"Just?" Dazai echoes, brushing his lips against him.

But if he wants a bashful confession, he's with the wrong fucking person. Chuuya catches his lips and sets his teeth into his bottom one, the taste of bitter blood, saliva, and sweat mixing into one cocktail of bruising urgency. He feels light-headed when he hears the shuddering

moan that he drags out of Dazai in his own mouth, light-headed and addicted and on the verge of imploding, so he blindly finds the belt around the man's hips, fumbling with the buckle until it pops open and his shaky fingers slide down to the zipper. Chuuya only breaks the kiss with a heaving chest once he slips a hand under his waistband and gets out his cock, hard, throbbing, and red at the tip.

Considering Chuuya had that in his mouth not even two hours ago, it's decidedly late to ask this, but he still does. "Have you fucked anyone lately?"

"Depends on what you define as lately," Dazai breathes out, watching him rub him off until a fat bead of pre-come dribbles down his length, spirited away by Chuuya's thumb. "I'm clean if that's what you're asking. I also have condoms."

What does Dazai define as *lately?*

A week?

Two?

A month?

After they 'married'? Before?

Chuuya pointedly ignores the way his stomach hardens at that thought. No need to stay loyal if your husband is just a symbol. "You have them here?" he wants to know instead.

"In my desk dr—"

"Then you don't have them."

Dazai's sharp eyes narrow like he's going to protest but in the end, he shrugs and simply pushes Chuuya back against the table with a palm on his chest. What a bastard, really. His gaze drags over the length of his body until it zeroes in on his navel, fingers sliding down to thumb at the piercing that Shirase pierced him with when they were fourteen years old.

"Pretty," Dazai murmurs, and if it wasn't for the way his cockhead slid between his cheeks, Chuuya would roll his eyes. Instead, his head falls back, spine arching as Dazai's cock teases his entrance without ever pushing inside.

“Come on,” Chuuya breathes out, his walls clenching furiously around empty air. “I’m ready.”

“I like it a lot.”

“Good for you! Can you just –” His voice gets stuck around a breathless moan when Dazai grips the sharp edge of his hipbone and finally pushes inside, slowly stretching Chuuya wide open until he feels like he’s torn apart from the inside in all the best ways.

“Chuuya,” Dazai murmurs, drawing his half-lidded, blinking eyes up to him as he leans over his body and rolls his thumb over his nipple.

Chuuya swallows, tasting salt on his lips, and shudders when he lifts his legs to loop them around Dazai’s hips and it makes his cock push that much deeper inside of him. “What?” he eventually breathes out.

“Don’t come until I say you can.”

It’s the only warning he gets before Dazai pulls back and thrusts forward again, burying himself inside Chuuya, over and over, setting up a rapid rhythm and depth that stimulates his prostate with every single thrust. Not having expected this after Dazai’s early teasing pace, Chuuya gets caught off guard, back arching off the table as the knot in his guts winds tighter and tighter at an alarming quick speed, nails digging into Dazai’s shoulders.

His breath stutters dangerously when the man pries his arms off him one by one to instead press his hands down on the table, practically rendering him powerless under the onslaught of pleasure. All he can do is try to meet the thrusts but the table underneath him is *hard* and moving his hips too much *hurts*, but being fucked like this feels so damn *good*.

Every time Dazai snaps his hips forward, it makes Chuuya’s dick that’s trapped between their bodies rub against the man’s abs, and combined with the constant pressure against his prostate, Chuuya’s soon shaking underneath him. “I -- I’m gonna –”

“Not yet,” Dazai tells him before he can finish, smearing the command over the sensitive patch of skin on his neck. “Not until I say you can.”

And something about it, stomach strung so tight that Chuuya could come right this second but not being *allowed to* make everything a hundred times more intense and hyper-sensitive, every slide of his cock burning through Chuuya’s skin.

As if Dazai's able to read his mind, he drags his lips over Chuuya's parted mouth to murmur, "That's a good boy."

And something in Chuuya just snaps.

His next exhale comes out in the form of a desperate sob, his muscles shaking from holding onto his orgasm as Dazai tortures him. "Please," he begs, not able to tell apart left from right anymore. "Please, I just – I just want to –" His whole body bucks uselessly off the table under Dazai. "Please I need it, I deserve it, I want… I *want* it."

Chuuya feels hot breath ghost over his cheek before Dazai says, "Now you can."

And his vision explodes into a world of white-hot colors.

Everything tightens and releases at the same time, and the pleasure keeps coming and coming, pumping through his veins and drowning him in it until he feels like he's going to choke on it. Dazai's cock continues hitting his prostate over and over, even when Chuuya arches off the table and comes all over his own stomach and chest, his dick shuddering with his release when Dazai brings his fingers to stroke him and elicits a few more twitching droplets of milky cum to dribble out.

By the time, Dazai's hips slow down to a gentle grinding inside him, Chuuya is squirming with oversensitivity. Yet the cock inside him is still hard, and he wouldn't be able to live with himself if he didn't push Dazai over the same edge he just tumbled off.

"Come on," he hisses, jerking his hips back to meet Dazai and hissing when it presses right against his prostate. "I want you to come too. *Now."*

Dazai's hands tighten around him, a jaded smirk glinting on his mouth. "How can I resist when you're such a sight under me, huh?"

"Just do it, idiot," Chuuya rasps out because he's not a fan of the odd flutter in his guts whenever the man says stupid things like that. Who cares what Chuuya looks like? Looks fade. Looks don't matter. *Power* doesn't. And this –

Dazai slams forward again, this time holding onto Chuuya's hipbones, and he doesn't stop. Even though Chuuya's been just hurrying him to do exactly this, he still has to scramble to hold somehow because he's being pulled into every single thrust and it's both hypersensitive

agony and the best thing he's ever felt. And then Dazai's rhythm starts stumbling, descending into something wild and feral, just chasing his orgasm and just the sight alone sends blood straight to Chuuya's soft, hypersensitive dick.

Dazai comes with a groan that he muffled against Chuuya's chest, grinding his cock into him like he's trying to carve out a space for himself there. Chuuya moans softly when he feels his slick and warm release inside him, satisfying something intrinsically primal. Dazai's hips keep fucking forward weakly, eliciting more shivery gasps and stuttered breaths until he eventually stills with his forehead plastered to Chuuya's right peck.

"Okay," Chuuya breathes out after a moment of silence. "Wow." He lifts his hand to drive it through Dazai's hair before he can think better of it. It's not like being nice every now and then is forbidden, right? And his curls are smooth and silky.

That seems to stir Dazai out of the afterglow haze, his face tilting so he can catch his gaze. "This what you wanted?"

Swallowing, Chuuya stares back at him. "Yup."

"Good." With the help of his hands, Dazai pushes himself up, and Chuuya has to stifle a needy whine. Feeling that weight on him was oddly nice. Though he soon gets distracted by the sight of Dazai taking him in greedily, naked and flushed and streaks of his own come splattered over his body. "Would you mind staying like this forever?" Dazai suddenly asks matter-of-factly. Then he swipes his thumb through the mess, acting like he's some sort of painter with cum as his color. Chuuya *hates* that his chest hitches. "Just lying around, looking pretty and fucked out."

"You're sick in the head," he mutters in reply.

"And yet you were begging for my cock just ten minutes ago," Dazai is all too happy to point out.

Chuuya pointedly turns away and glances heavenward, asking someone up there for assistance. "That was a sex thing. Don't let it get to your head." His response would be much more dignified if it didn't end on a high note as Dazai chooses to bury himself inside him once again, exploiting the fact that his oversensitive walls are quickly turning into more need.

"Do you want to do it again?"

“Fuck,” Chuuya groans under his breath, too weak not to grind back and chase the tiny sparks of pleasure firing through his systems all over again. Maybe Dazai was right and spending the rest of his days just fucking like a wild animal isn’t such a bad idea. Maybe building societies and systems was the point where humanity went wrong. Maybe they were just meant to eat berries, fuck, and shit.

“I want to, yeah,” he eventually mutters, somehow managing to lift his head to look at Dazai. “But not here. My back is killing me.”

Dazai offers him a dazzling smile only to pull out at the same time, making Chuuya hiss and clench at the sudden emptiness inside him. He feels like fucking used to be easier–a lot of things were easier before he met Dazai–but it also never felt as basally fulfilling as this. “Well, good thing that I have a bed next door.”

Scowling, Chuuya sits up and watches Dazai pull up his slacks and tuck away his dick inside. His abs clench again in anticipation even if they just finished round one. “You also have a couch,” he points out.

“Sure, but why limit ourselves to a couch when there is a perfectly good bed?”

“Give me your shirt,” Chuuya demands instead of answering. His clothes are somewhere on the floor, he’s stark-naked and *dirty,* in every sense of the word, and Dazai’s button-up should be the perfect length to cover a good portion of his body while they’re moving business around.

Dazai pulls it off without any complaints, but then he squints and retreats his hands before giving Chuuya the shirt. “First answer my question.”

Of course everything is a damn exchange to him.

“I don’t know,” he mutters and grabs for the shirt anyway. “Jiji always sleeps there, okay? It’s weird.”

Dazai falters and Chuuya uses his visible surprise to finally steal the shirt. When he’s draping it over his body, Dazai lets out a startling laugh. “You don’t want to have sex in my bed because my cat sometimes sleeps there?”

“It’s weird! It’s like having sex in your child’s bed!”

“Chuuya,” Dazai says, grinningly broadly, and the way he comes

closer and touches his thighs should not have this absurd effect on Chuuya anymore after they fucked but he still has to swallow a nervous lump down his throat. “Sweetheart. I assure you Jiji doesn’t know what sex is and she won’t care either. She’s with Gin right now anyway.”

Chuuya clicks his tongue and rolls his eyes. “Fine. Whatever. But I don’t want to hear it if I suddenly can’t get it up because I keep thinking about the cat that usually sleeps there.”

“I don’t think you will have any problems getting hard,” Dazai murmurs, and lets his gaze pointedly wander down his body and…

“Shut up,” Chuuya mutters, sliding off the table and drawing Dazai’s shirt tighter around him as he leads the way to the bedroom. He hopes it gets all dirty. “You talk too much. Have I ever told you that?”

“Only every time you see me.”

And somehow it’s still not enough.

Chuuya doesn’t wait for Dazai to catch up, nor does he ask for his permission to use the bathroom where he scrubs the dried come off his body with a wet towel, brushes the mess of his hair into a neater ponytail, and then grabs the plain black bathrobe off the rack for later use. When he comes back, Dazai’s stretching out his back with a casual arm draped behind his neck. Not even naked.

“What are you doing?” Chuuya demands to know with a scowl.

“Refreshments,” Dazai nods at the nightstand where a few bottles of water and juice are standing. “Drink something.”

Still frowning, Chuuya snatches some water and paces through the room as he guzzles it down, trying to look around but not really seeing anything. After a while, he gets bored of that and shoots an accusing stare in Dazai’s direction only to see that his eyes are closed like he’s fucking napping or something. He stalks over to the bed and climbs on it, not too quietly, and when that doesn’t make the man stir, he places his hand on his crotch and squeezes shamelessly.

Dazai’s eyes jerk open into a squint.

“I asked *what are you doing?”*

“I am trying to relax, but you’re not… ah,” Dazai lets out a sweet sigh

when Chuuya rubs his dick through the slacks. "… making it very easy." And then he grins. "Or, should I say you're making it very hard?"

Chuuya hopes his unimpressed stare is enough to tell him what he thinks of that pun. "I'm tempted to leave because of this bad joke alone."

"You always say you'll leave, but you never do," Dazai murmurs, lazily closing his eyes again as he lets Chuuya palm him. "Maybe it's time for you to accept that you like it here."

Chuuya's jaw clenches even though Dazai doesn't even bother to acknowledge his irritation, not when he's stretched out on the bed like a damn king waiting to be served.

Chuuya would have left.

He would have.

Or, so he thought.

"Maybe you should think about why I always say that," Chuuya mutters instead as he gets sick of playing the waiting game and slips his hand under the waistband to get out Dazai's dick, barely even hard.

Tsk.

His pride would be offended if he wasn't all too aware of that little thing called the refractory period.

Above him, Dazai lets out a satisfied breath when Chuuya leans down to slide down on his cock until it's nestled inside the slick heat of his mouth. Then he strokes long fingers through Chuuya's bangs and asks, "tell me", knowing exactly that he isn't in the position to speak right now. When the only thing Chuuya does is grunt something unintelligible in the back of his throat, closing his eyes so he won't have to see that sardonic grin, Dazai hums. "Hm, I don't hear anything. I guess that means that it's really just all bark and no bite."

Oh, how Chuuya wishes he could show him that he can bite too, but if the choice is between getting laid and letting Dazai have the last word, *for now,* he chooses his own pleasure. He can always demonstrate just how sharp his fangs are afterwards.

And besides, feeling Dazai slowly fill out in his mouth, feeling the pulse of his dick and the little twitches in his abs when Chuuya swallows around him does something to him. He gets so light-headed with buzzing anticipation that he barely stops himself from humping the mattress under his own neglected dick.

Chuuya pulls off to breathe when his cock is at half-mast, his throat too sore to speak right now so he just spares Dazai a fleeting glance before he wraps his lips back around his cockhead as his fist pumps the shaft.

“You know,” Dazai says above him, his tone as warm as the hand that’s cupping Chuuya’s cheek, “you treat me remarkably well for all your professions of hate.” Stupid, annoying bastard. “So good to me.” So *smug.* His long fingers suddenly tighten, forcing Chuuya’s head up so he will meet Dazai’s eyes. “But you like being good, don’t you?”

It’s not about being good, Chuuya wants to say. *Not about anything that has to do with Dazai either. It’s just about hurrying things along. About productivity, if you will.*

But Dazai has him trapped with a hand seizing his chin and his cock in his mouth and his eyes is so intense that maybe *this* is the reason why he usually keeps the other one covered–because anyone who would stare into both of them would get lost in them. Bit by bit, Dazai strips off the armor of anger and defiance Chuuya wears and forces him to see what’s been slumbering underneath all the time. Something smaller, something more fragile.

Dazai’s thumb traces over his stretched open lips, then slips inside, forcing him to open his mouth even wider as it presses against the roof of his mouth. “Feels right to be good, hm?”

Chuuya blinks back at him, feeling like he’s not lying on the bed but swimming in the air. It’s different from the tainted sorrow. That’s pure adrenaline and blood pumping through his veins and the wind in his ears. This is all haze, a sluggish beat in his chest, and a gentle warmth hugging his body.

“You are,” Dazai says, keeping his mouth open as he bucks his hips to lazily fuck into his mouth. “You’re so good to me.”

It’s a little hard, literally, now that Dazai’s cock is thick and full, pulsing every time it brushes his throat, and Chuuya’s barely getting any air through it, but it’s also easy to just let his eyes flutter closed and float in this pleasant sensation, not even the impatience of his

own pleasure sharp enough to pop the bubble around him.

His eyelids flutter open when the length slides out of his mouth entirely, leaving his jaw sore and tired but also empty. Dazedly, Chuuya wipes at the spit that's running down his chin until he hears Dazai say, "Come here."

Chuuya's limbs move on their own account, crawling up the length of his body until they're face to face and Dazai loops a finger in the choker around his neck to tug him forward into a kiss. Chuuya melts into it, his lips so sore that every brush of tongue makes him shiver and whine softly, his hands finding purchase around Dazai's shoulders. Chuuya's hips subconsciously grind forward and elicit a hiss when his aching dick brushes against Dazai's.

"Remember how you asked me to help you relax?" Dazai murmurs against his mouth before lowering his mouth to his jaw. "I want to do that."

Chuuya's head tosses back as lips connect to a sensitive spot, sucking cruelly until he's gasping. "Feeling pretty… ah, relaxed right now," he manages to reply.

Dazai's mouth curves against his neck. "I know. But I want to push that edge. I want to fuck you *brainless*."

His next breath hiccups in his throat. Chuuya nods before he can even think about it. "Yeah," he breathes out with his fingers tangled in Dazai's curls. "Help me relax."

"Clever boy," Dazai's hoarse voice praises before he drags him back into a devouring kiss, sucking Chuuya's tongue into his mouth and drawing every possible pathetic noise out of him.

The way he yanks him back by his collar and smiles at him is cruel in comparison. Yet it only makes Chuuya's guts clench tighter, knowing that at the end of his predatory fangs is the promise of an orgasm so good that it will make up for the torture.

Keeping Chuuya still with one hand, Dazai lifts the other one to rip off the gauze around his neck. Chuuya watches, surprisingly patient and simply curious, as Dazai uses the bandages to press both Chuuya's arms behind his back and tie them together with that makeshift bond after he helps him out of his own shirt.

"How's that?"

Chuuya wiggles his wrist and snorts. “I could get out of that in my sleep.”

“But you’re awake, so you’re not going to.” Dazai flicks a patronizing finger over Chuuya’s bruised lips. “You’ll be a good boy for me, right?”

Anything that he wants to say right now is too damn nice for a man like Dazai, so he keeps his mouth shut, only giving him a half-shrug in response. His pulse picks up a little when the hand around his neck pushes him down into the mattress and into an obscene arch. The moan that gets punched out of him is even more obscene, and Chuuya would bother to stifle it if there wasn’t something electrifying about being forced down with his arms locked behind him, no other choice but take what’s given to him and just trust that Dazai’s going to take care of him.

And the odd thing is that Chuuya does trust him.

Not a single nerve in his body doubts that whatever Dazai will do with him will be good for him too in the end.

The opposite, actually. Dazai strips him of control and power, and Chuuya’s stomach aches with the sudden outburst of fluttering need that it elicits.

With his cheek pressed to the bed, Chuuya breathes around the liquid flames in his lungs and waits. The mattress dips, Dazai shuffles around, and then hot fingers pat the inside of his thighs, nudging them open even wider.

“Beautiful,” he hears Dazai murmur. “You’re doing very good. All you have to do is do what I say and I’ll take care of you.”

Chuuya takes a deep breath, lets it out, and closes his eyes.

At first, nothing happens; the anticipation of the waiting game alone makes his dick twitch between his legs. Then a hand slides around his hip and the slick, pulsating head of Dazai’s cock presses against his entrance. Chuuya moans, loud and long, as it pushes inside without any teasing this time, still slow enough to savor the stretch but with enough speed to feel like he’s coming apart at the seams, the angle impossibly deep in this position.

Chuuya’s walls clench, torn between staying like this so he can get used to the stretch and needing Dazai to move and make true to his

promise. The mattress dips again like Dazai's leaning back with one hand, and a moment later, there is no choice to make anymore. His hips slam into him, hard, dragging out a muffled cry from Chuuya from the force of it. Then again. And again. Chuuya would like it a little faster, but the dead-on precious of every thrust more than makes up for it, drowning him in the high of a quickly approaching climax anyway.

However, the moment Chuuya thinks he's gotten used to the pace Dazai changes things up. He leans forward, covering him with his chest, and winds his fingers in Chuuya's hair before pulling him back by it. Not too gently either. His scalp stings, burns, and aches but the pain sends its very own bolt down his spine, especially when it forces him into an even deeper arch.

One particular thrust draws a shuddering gasp from Chuuya because it's right there, right there, right there –

Dazai's arm slides under him and pulls him up and back against his chest. The world shifts so does the angle as Chuuya basically gets impaled on his cock, his hands scrambling to find purchase on the thighs and hips behind him while his chest hiccups dangerously. It's so *deep* like this, but it's also arresting, immobilizing, fixing him in place with nowhere to go but Dazai, Dazai, Dazai.

And Dazai just slides a hand around his throat, squeezing only lightly enough to make his eyelids flutter with each agonizingly slow but deep thrust.

Panting heavily, Chuuya stops struggling and just lets his head fall back against him, relaxing into the touch. The knot in his stomach is tight, and the pace doesn't let the pleasure climb any higher, only makes it stronger and stronger, but if he just closes his eyes and focuses on that instead of the climax waiting for him at the end, it gets easier. It gets *better.* He can swim in it instead of fighting for it.

"That's a good boy," Dazai murmurs in his ear and his voice, his entire presence not only close but basically wrapped around him like a spider's web around a fly sends shivers down his spine.

Arching into the touch, Chuuya moans softly.

His reward is a hand slipping down to his chest and flicking his nipple, eliciting another gasp, only for it to bleed into a keening whimper when Dazai picks up the pace, fucking him hard and fast with no space for anything but the razor-sharp pleasure inside him

singeing his nerves.

Then fingers slide down to his aching cock, long and too dry but somehow perfect to heighten the storm of sensations into one single peak and make Chuuya believe that he's done for.

"I'm gonna –" He shakes in Dazai's grip, torn between wanting to ride that edge and come, and wanting to be good for another while, to be patient and relaxed and just enjoy being fucked silly without worrying about anything else. But Dazai's fist is tight and hot and he's basically dragging Chuuya's orgasm out by the throat. "*Dazai –"*

"It's okay, love. Just let go."

Chuuya's body locks and his release floods him. Wave after wave of hot-white bliss as Dazai's cock all but *grinds* against his prostate, milking out every possible drop of pleasure and drowning him in it.

He only blinks open his heavy eyelids when the fingers around his cock squeeze tightly, not hurting him but also not really allowing him to actually come. Confused, Chuuya turns his head and opens his mouth, but Dazai's faster, capturing his lips not to hear him speak but to swallow him whole, his tongue invading him and robbing him of any coherent thoughts as the only thing he can do is try to survive the onslaught of wildly different sensations making his head spin in circles.

It's strange, Chuuya can feel his dick throbbing with the need to release but it's not as bad as the first time they did this, not as bad as when Dazai denied him an orgasm for an hour before finally letting him come. That urge is still there, but it's subdued by the lingering traces of the orgasm he *did* have just now even though it was apparently a dry one, and it makes everything so… so *good.*

"Dazai," he breathes out, barely able to kiss him back in this state. "I'm so –" His cheeks burn, salty droplets of sweat rolling down to his lips. He has the stupid need to tell Dazai how good he feels, and how good *Dazai* makes him feel. There's just this tiny part of rationality still clinging to him, whispering that he's acting like a naïve fool in the hands of a snake. But it does feel *so good.* And Chuuya's chest aches with it.

"I know," Dazai murmurs and drives a hand through his sweat-soaked bangs. "Feels good, huh?"

Whimpering, Chuuya gives him a few shaky nods too many.

He thinks Dazai smiles before he draws away, the sudden absence of his cock eliciting a choked exhale, to gently push him down against the mattress again. This time, he doesn't force Chuuya into an arch but nudges his thighs apart with his own knee before he slides an arm under one leg and buries his cock inside him again.

It's different, Chuuya feels smothered by the man above him and inside him and around him, but it's also strangely exhilarating to be cracked open like an egg, exposed in all his naked and terrible glory, and *still* be treated like *this*.

Like he's actually worth something.

Like he's human.

And that, combined with the constant, rhythmic pressure against his prostate has Chuuya winding up all over again without even having to try or fight tooth and nails for it. One moment he's pressing his face into the sheets, the next he's falling again, shivering through another orgasm, walls clenching madly around Dazai's cock and arching into it at the same time because like *this?* It's never enough. It could never be enough.

It's like Dazai has found a bottomless pond inside him, one that's all gooey pleasure and no pain, no reality, no wars and betrayals and fears looming over him like a shadow. Just this unbridled ecstasy of warmth and honey-sweet desire. And with each new sobbing breath, each brush of fingers, and each thrust inside him, Chuuya sinks. Deeper and deeper.

He's still floating in the soft after-shocks of another orgasm, not even sure whether he came or not and not really caring about it anyway when he hears Dazai groan into his shoulder, a deep, low sound that makes his stomach flex with fluttering nerves all over again.

He wants Dazai to feel this, too.

He wants to *make* Dazai feel like this. Maybe not now, though he would if he could. But someday. Someday soon if he'll allow him. If he can lay himself bare as Chuuya did.

Somehow Chuuya doubts that he would.

And it makes the next garbled noise out of his mouth ache in the pit of his stomach, bruising his insides with a weight that doesn't belong here. Not really.

Dazai replies by pressing feather-light kisses to his sweaty cheek, the blossoming bruises on his neck, his shoulder blade, his spine. His hips speed up, stimulating the patch of sensitive nerves inside him so sweetly and thoroughly that Chuuya's soon swimming in nothing but pure bliss again, that flicker of reality a distant sun above the surface.

"You feel so good," Dazai's voice tells him, smearing the words somewhere in the crook of his shoulder or his ribcage or the twitching muscles on his arm… Chuuya's not even sure. He's both everywhere and nowhere at once. "So perfect for me."

The words draw a moan from him, feeling high on the gentle praise. High enough to let Dazai roll them over once again. They end up on their sides, Dazai winding one arm under his thigh and hugging it before he pushes inside. His head is stuffed with candy-cotton thoughts and Chuuya can only gasp, leaning back into Dazai as he fucks him with short, little grinds that quickly melt his guts into goo all over again, dragging a kind of pleasure out of him that he never even thought was possible, definitely not in such a short time and this intense and all-consuming.

That white-hot bliss gushes through him once again, and it's perfect, reaching every edge of his body, filling up every empty space of devouring blackness with something bright. Chuuya doesn't expect Dazai to nudge his leg even higher, then get his hand around his cock again, and the shock of skin against the skin so soon after another peak drives him over the edge again–or maybe he never stopped coming in the first place. All he knows is that the combination of Dazai's cock pressing against his prostate over and over, and Dazai's fist around his dick, stroking him to total completion until he's twitching and his cum spurts inside the skin-tight cage around him, slick, warm and dribbling down his length only for Dazai to milk out another round, and another, and –

The pool of syrup Chuuya's been swimming in turns a little maddening, emptying him completely while simultaneously demanding more and more, and Chuuya sobs out a shuddering gasp, weakly thrusting into Dazai's hand and then back into him to fuck himself on his cock while also trying to squirm away because it's too much and he's not sure there's enough of him to give anymore.

But Dazai's groaning too, clutching Chuuya to his chest as he makes him ride out his orgasm for as long as humanly possible. The sound only makes Chuuya tighten up, and scramble in his grasp for *something. Anything.*

He gasps with relief when Dazai releases his dick to push Chuuya on his back. Still holding his thigh to keep him open for him, Dazai leans down to his chest, pulling his nipples into his mouth as his hips start to lose their rhythm and lethal precision, descending into a wild staccato of heartbeats, breaths, and the chase for his own orgasm, fucking himself to the peak.

After breaking free from the bandages around his arms, Chuuya only has the strength to curl his fingers in the sheets and weakly meet the desperate thrusts until he eventually feels Dazai's breath hiccup against his chest, hips stilling where they're pressed flushes to his ass, and his cock twitching inside him. Slick, hot cum erupts inside him, somehow getting even deeper, and Chuuya moans, clamps down around him to ride out his orgasm just like Dazai did for him too.

After another moment, Dazai's muscles release all the tension with a heavy, content gasp, and his lips suckle around Chuuya's nipple one last time, eliciting a soundless, hyper-sensitive whimper, before he drops his forehead on his chest and just breathes, his hips still fucking weakly into him now and then.

That's all they do.

Breathe.

Chuuya's eyelids are a heavy, comforting weight on his face, and he drifts between being half-awake and half-unconscious, barely feeling like a person, only bothering to wiggle his fingertips now and then to lazily stroke through the silky curls of Dazai's hair.

"So much about not getting it up."

Chuuya blinks, connecting the words to their meaning and context and –

"Shut up."

Dazai's amused laughter ghosts over his chest, tickles, and it should be weird that they are still lying like this, still connected in very intimate ways, but Chuuya doesn't have enough energy in his left to care about any of it. Right now everything's okay.

It's a strange feeling, that blissful peacefulness inside his head. No god of calamity, no whispers, no invading thoughts. Only breezy silence.

Odd.

But he thinks he likes it.

Above him, Dazai shifts, sitting up and it makes his dick slip out of him, drawing an exhausted wince from Chuuya, though he doesn't try to keep it up for long, instead letting his eyes flutter shut again. Something tells him that Dazai will take care of the mess that they made. And today –

Tonight, he's alright with that.

The next time he comes to him again it's because of the noise of someone cracking open a window. Chuuya yawns, stretches his arms over his head and discovers that he's under the sheets, though still naked, before he lazily rolls over to see that Dazai's airing the room and fussing with the thick velvet curtains, a black bathrobe loosely hanging around his frame.

That feeling of being high off sex and orgasms, floating on cotton-candy clouds and syrup-waves is no longer as pronounced, most of it worn off with sleep, but oddly enough, that sense of calm peacefulness still lingers.

"How long was I out?" he mumbles eventually, voice hoarse and his throat sandpaper-dry. Gross.

Dazai turns around with a sigh. "Half an hour, give or take." Grabbing a bottle of water from the shelf against the wall, he wordlessly offers it to Chuuya and tosses it over when he nods.

Chuuya catches it with one hand and sits up. The water runs down his throat like sacred wine, better than anything he has ever tasted as he guzzles the entire thing down in one go and burps loudly.

"Charming."

But he only shrugs and flops back with a content sigh, feeling better than he has in a hot while. The only thing missing right now is a cigarette. "So what do you usually do after this?" he asks.

The mattress dips under the added weight. A moment later Dazai's back hits the sheets as well. "What do you mean?"

"After you're done fucking someone's soul out," Chuuya says dryly because he doubts the man had trouble actually understanding the question. "Do you let them sleep here? Should I leave? Who *do* you fuck when you're not busy ruling this madhouse?"

Even though he's still counting the fading stars on the ceiling, he can practically feel Dazai's smoldering eyes lazily slide to him. "Curious, aren't you?"

"I'd just like to know how urgently I should get myself tested after this romp is all," he mutters with a click of his tongue. "So if you've been sleeping around lately, it'd be nice to know."

"No sleeping around," Dazai murmurs.

Chuuya rolls to his side, his sore muscles aching, and props up his chin on his elbow with a scowl. "But you've had sex with *someone*?" he prods.

"I've had the same partner for the last year."

The words achieve the exact opposite of the effect that they should have: chances that Dazai didn't infect with something are a bit higher. It should be good news. Yet Chuuya's stomach hardens to stone. "You have a partner."

It's not that he particularly cares about the ethics of cheating–god knows sleeping with the head of the port mafia is morally worse—but he's already gone through this ordeal with Luca before and he didn't want to be someone's damn mistress ever again after that.

And it's the fact that Chuuya has spent weeks, *months* with him, wondering about that strange connection and listening to his stupid, coy flirting and his vows and this and that only for Dazai to be… what? In a relationship?

"Had," Dazai responds blissfully unaware of Chuuya's meltdown. "It's not easy to have sex with a lot of people when you constantly have to question whether they will attempt to assassinate you in the throes of passion. So I only had one partner, someone I trusted, but that's a thing of the past now."

Chuuya blinks. "So… you're not in a relationship with anyone?"

Dazai tilts his head to squint at him, wearing amused confusion like a crown. "What? Chuuya that rumor about me having ten wives and husbands was just that. A rumor. I thought we established that already?"

The relief that floods Chuuya should be cause for concern but at the same, it's so sweet that he soaks in it… at least, until he remembers

that it's Dazai who is looking at him, and out of all the things to know, this, whatever it is, should not be one of them. Never.

"You just said partner," he mutters, drawing the blanket higher and rolling over to the other side. "How should I know what you mean?"

"I mean you could use common sense…"

"Whatever. It doesn't matter. Shut up."

"You were prodding me for information, not the other way around." Dazai audibly shifts behind him. Chuuya has the dangerous suspicion that the bastard's even closer now, probably facing him. He can practically feel his gaze drilling into his back. "… although I should probably return the favor, shouldn't I?"

Chuuya rolls his eyes.

"Chuuya, I can get sick too, you know. In fact, I would get even sicker since your ability does all the regenerative work for you. Mine just takes."

He lets out a breath and says, "What do you want to know?"

"When," Dazai drawls. "And who?"

"You didn't tell me who either. You're not slick, shitty bastard."

"Because you don't know her. What's the point of giving you the name?"

So it's a her.

Or it was.

"Oh, and you know every person that ever entered my life?"

"I might."

The annoying thing is that Dazai actually might, considering how many other things he knows all well.

"Three—four months ago," he eventually admits. "Some guy at a pub we used to hang out at."

"You didn't even bother to learn his name?" Dazai asks, amused.

“What’s the point of that?” he shoots back. “It was just one night, and I never saw him again.” And then. “What, do y*ou* know his name?”

He hears Dazai let out a soft snort. “You think I spent the last two years following you around and keeping tabs on you?”

“Didn’t you?”

“… Not to this extent.”

“Still weird,” Chuuya tells him.

“And yet….” He can tell what Dazai is about to do, what he is about to *say,* by the magnetic shift in the air before he actually does it. An arm slides under his waist and drags him across the bed until he ends up face to face with Dazai’s Cheshire grin, his heart pounding in his ears. “You were all too happy to let me fuck you not even an hour ago.”

Staring back at him, Chuuya swallows a bundle of nerves before he replies. “I can find you weird and still have sex with you. These things aren’t related whatsoever.”

“So you’re saying you’d just let anyone screw you? Mmm, and you accuse me of sleeping around.”

“I was just *asking,”* he argues and juts out his chin, ignoring that it puts them even closer. Again. It always does somehow. “And don’t let this one or two-time thing get to your head.”

“Four times,” Dazai corrects with a snobby gleam in his eyes.

“Doesn’t count if it all happens in one day.”

“So you’re going to pretend that it won’t happen again?”

Chuuya’s eyes narrow. “And you’re so sure it will?”

“I told you. It’s not easy to find someone that I can both trust and that appeals to my tastes. But now that I have you…” Dazai trails off and offers him a chortling grin.

It’s an ironic thing to say considering what this relationship is based on: a lie.

Sure, the sheep left. There’s no one left to betray Dazai for anymore, but it used to be the plan, no matter how tattered and idiotic. And yet

here Dazai is, openly admitting that he trusts Chuuya. (And that Chuuya appeals to his tastes, but that's not relevant, though no less satisfying.)

"I fail to remember when *I* ever said that I want this as well," Chuuya remarks wryly.

"You and I both know how bad you are at admitting things that you want." The hand that slid under his waist and has not moved since then twists to push against the mattress and in the next moment, Dazai's straddling him, face looming inches from his own. It's a position that painfully reminds Chuuya of their sparring match… or rather how it ended.

"Come on, Chuuya," Dazai drawls, ghosting his mouth over his lips. "You're going to pretend that you won't exploit the helpful hand that I'm offering you here? You really want to go out to some pub and fuck some nameless stranger for not even half of what you got from me?"

"You really are an arrogant piece of shit," Chuuya breathes out even if he never denies the question either. Because Dazai is right; of course, he is. That doesn't mean that he'll get to hear it out of his mouth.

Dazai accepts the insult like it's a piece of jewelry that he can parade around. "But I'm not wrong, am I?"

So fucking annoying.

Chuuya hates him. Really.

Sometimes he hates him so much that it's all he can think about.

"Fine, whatever," he snaps out eventually. "I guess this isn't the last time this is going to happen. You happy?"

Dazai all but croons above him, lashes fluttering when he lowers his mouth to brush their lips together as he murmurs, "very."

Taking the bait, Chuuya chases his mouth, now that there's no need to act like he doesn't want to kiss him. But the bastard sits up, keeping Chuuya pinned against the bed with a hand on his chest as he smiles sweetly at him. "So nice to be on the same page with you, my love."

He barely suppresses a snarl, instead just calling, "fucking bastard" after Dazai as he climbs off the bed.

Dazai laughs shamelessly in reply, though he does pause on the threshold of his bedroom to shoot him a smirk. “Are you coming or what?”

“Coming where?” Chuuya grumbles with a skeptic frown.

“To wash away all our sins,” is the mysterious answer.

In reality, it’s just Dazai’s enigmatic way of saying *taking a bath.* Though, to be fair, it’s a jacuzzi bath. And also the only reason Chuuya agrees to it is that bathing together sounds intimate, dipping into a tiny pool with underwater jets is just something that mafia echelons do to relax after a hard day’s work.

Case in point: Dazai strolls in with a plate of finger food and a bottle of wine after Chuuya climbs inside, earning a wry scowl.

“Did you just have that lying around?” he asks even as he eagerly reaches for the bottle.

“I made some arrangements while you were peacefully snoring in my bed.”

“I don’t snore.”

“Now you’re just lying to yourself, Chuuya.”

“Tch. Gimme that.” He occupies himself with the snacks as Dazai joins him on the other side of the tub, partly because his stomach is growling with neglect and partly because he’s not in the mood to catch a glimpse of Dazai’s junk and get horny all over again. He has exhausted his limit of orgasms for at least the next twelve hours. Afterwards, he’ll be ready to go again, though.

Judging by the way Dazai lets his eyes drift close across from him, accompanied by a peaceful sigh, he’s just as tired.

Chuuya spends some time nibbling on the food and filling his stomach with enough wine to feel a pleasant buzz in his chest before he follows Dazai’s example and just *rests*, savoring the perfectly hot temperature of the water, the heavenly pressure of the jet tubes massaging his back and shoulders, that relaxed state of mind that only ever comes from a good romp… or two.

For a while, it’s just that. *Good.*

And a tentative voice inside his head whispers that perhaps…

Perhaps he could even get used to it. It won't be a perfect life. Not even half as good as what could have been if a lot of things had gone differently. But it could be a life worth living nonetheless. The sheep might never view him as the same guy that they rescued off the streets, but maybe, given enough time, he could at least be friendly with them again. Check in every once in and while, see how they're doing, and whether he can help. He'd still talk to Yuan every day, or every second one, no matter what organizations they belong to. And as for his life in the port mafia… he could spend his days training his army of misfits. Give them something worth living for. He would protect the city even if it's from the side of the port mafia. Find some kind of purpose. And at the end of the day, he would come here. Find whatever bubble of bliss he can with Dazai whether it's through sex or through one of the pleasant conversations that they occasionally have.

Dazai, who has somehow become his friend. Someone that Chuuya undeniably trusts with his mind and body. Someone he enjoys spending time with. Someone he likes being silent with.

It's a life that doesn't sound that bad.

Not the life he had imagined for himself, sure, but hey, who ever does? It's not a *pick and choose* kind of thing, but a *make something out of what you're given*.

***

Afterward, as he's tightening a towel around his hips, Dazai says, "I know you chose the option maid outfit but I would like to revisit the other one still."

Brows tugging into a scowl, Chuuya turns to look at him where he's sitting at the edge of the tub and… filing his nails or something, looking more like a princess in his robe and fair skin and short, dark hair than the boss of the port mafia. (The one that bit into a poisonous apple. What was her name? Snow White?)

"I'll pass," Chuuya says.

"At least hear me out."

"Hear *what* out?" he mutters, starting to aggressively comb through his knotted hair. "This is my one chance to at least partially on a good note with my friends and you want me to stay out of it?"

“This isn’t about the little lambs. It’s about the organization you’re trying to rescue them from.”

Chuuya narrows his eyes at him in the mirror. “What about it?”

“It could be a trap,” Dazai points out.

“So? Then we’ll prepare for a trap.”

“Or you could not even risk the chance. You will still have more than enough chances to talk to your friends afterward.”

“Since when do you make the strategic choices of a coward?” Chuuya demands. Dazai didn’t have any of these reservations when he made both of them go and defuse a bomb. Or dress Chuuya up in a dress and ‘sell’ him to a known trafficker. And now the risk of a trap is suddenly the end of the world?

Dazai’s sigh only makes him scowl harder. It’s not an unreasonable thing to say. It’s *his* request that is unreasonable. “Let me ask this then: do you know what happened to you in Osaka?”

Chuuya stills.

“Do you know what caused that breakdown?” Dazai presses on. “Do you know how to *avoid* it?”

“What’s your point?” Chuuya snaps. “You think I’ll blow a fuse, that it?”

“Don’t you?”

“*No*. I’m fine now and I’ve been fine the last few weeks, too. Osaka was –” His teeth clench. Osaka was different because Osaka was horrible. What happened, what’s still happening in another city, another country, is horrible. And it all boiled over.

Perhaps Chuuya should use the information that Dazai *clearly* has on him, his background, whatever it is that’s slumbering inside him, but… the only reason he ever wanted to know in the first place was so he could find out who the hell he is. To piece together the bits of a half-assed identity. But now that his life is going in a completely different direction anyway, why bother? He knows enough. Everything else doesn’t matter. Not really.

“Osaka was a one-time thing,” Chuuya lies for the sake of

convenience. “Leave it alone. I’m going whether you like it or not.”

“All right,” Dazai says to his surprise. “But then I’m going too.”

“Right.”

“I’m serious.”

“Risking the Bishop’s Staff getting their hands on *you* so you can prove a point? That’s not happening.”

“Ah, but risking them getting their hands on you is better?”

“Should have given me a worse option if you were so worried,” Chuuya tells him, walking out of the bathroom. “Now be a good boy and stick to your word.” To be fair, he says the last part under his breath, not counting on the fact that anyone but him will hear it.

Which is why the sudden attack catches him by surprise.

An attack that comes in the form of Dazai’s unfair height advantage being able to press him right up against the wall and pin him there as he leans down to a murmur, “I remember someone else here being all too eager to be called a boy good.”

“It’s not in good form to keep reminding me of what I may or may not like in bed,” Chuuya mutters back and manages to spin around in his grasp, still pressed flush against the wall but at least able to stare at him with the most unimpressed expression in his repertoire. “And who’s to say that you don’t like it either? You did seem a little eager to please, Dazai.”

“I don’t like dogs.”

“Well, you don’t seem to like yourself too much either, so what’s your point?”

Dazai blinks, a temporarily but satisfying flicker of stunned surprise ghosting over his face.

“What, cat got your tongue?”

“Honestly, yes.” Now it’s Chuuya’s turn to be surprised. “I did not expect you to say that, so now my brain is rebooting.”

Squinting at Dazai, he opens and closes his mouth again. “Whatever. But since we *are* on this topic anyway.” Chuuya not so subtly fiddles

with the silk belt that's keeping Dazai robed right now. "Are you strictly into fucking people because…"

Dazai raises his brow when he trails off with a coy smile. "Because?"

"Because I was pretty sure I have no energy left in me for sex but…" He pauses to raise his gaze to him. "I could be motivated again."

"Hm," Dazai drawls, low and lazy and leans close enough to let his breath wash over Chuuya's cheek. "You'll just how to find out for yourself."

That's a *yes*.

It sounds a lot like a *yes*.

Dazai's still there, one hand pushes against the wall and cages him in and Chuuya allows himself the freedom to pull him down by his robe and slot their mouths together, a slow, unhurried, and sensual slide of lips, and that's definitely a *yes*.

And then somewhere in the room, a phone goes off, and that's a *no*.

Breaking the kiss, Chuuya sighs and leans back against the wall. Dazai flicks his cheek before he goes to accept the intruding call.

For a few moments, he remains standing there, listening to Dazai's muffled voice somewhere in the office, before a yawn reminds him that it's been a long night and that he might as well wait for the man to come back in bed. Lying down is dangerous. His eyelids immediately start to drop as soon as he settles on his stomach, chin resting on his crossed arms, but he'll be ready to go once Dazai's back. Really. For sure.

A few minutes turn into a lot of them. By the time he hears footsteps behind him, Chuuya has to jerk up out of his half-slumber to blurt, "I'm awake!"

"How nice," Dazai's amused voice says, followed by the sound of doors sliding open. Chuuya looks over his shoulders to see him grab a pair of slacks out of his closet. "But I have to go and check on a situation.

"Oh." Chuuya blinks a few times. "Need any help?"

"Nah. Just bureaucratic stuff."

“Okay.” Technically, that means there is no reason to stay here any longer. Chuuya has a perfectly fine bed of his own where he can sleep. It’s just that it’s *so far* away right now. An entire trek through the office and ride down with the elevator. He might as well hike to Russia on foot.

Probably sensing his reluctance to get up, Dazai says, “Shouldn’t take too long. An hour tops.”

Ah.

“I can take a nap in the meantime,” Chuuya suggests.

“You can.”

“And when you come back…”

Dazai hums in agreement.

“What a wonderful plan,” Chuuya mutters, voice muffled as his face is already smushed against a pillow. “Soooo great. Don’t – mmmm… get yourself killed before that.”

He thinks he hears the sound of Dazai’s soft laughter shortly before the world goes blank.

Chapter End Notes

> Well, I hope the wait was worth it! The plot will be turning spicy soon too >:)
>
> Next chapter we have:
> - a phone call
> - THE FLAGS
> - and some history

Chapter 25: Flags

Chapter Notes

> This chapter includes Stormbringer spoilers! Not really plot-related but a spoiler nonetheless :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The persistent sound of his vibrating phone drags Chuuya out of the sweetest slumber he's had in a while the next morning, making him search blindly for the damn thing and mutter an annoyed, "w*hat?"* into the speaker before he even blinks open his eyes.

"Chuuya," Yuan's voice says on the other end, "where are you?"

And that… is a very good question.

Disoriented, he dares to crack one eyelid open and take a look. Dark sheets. Dark room with only a sliver of daylight peeking through and… the unconscious form of Dazai Osamu on the other side of the bed he's currently lying in.

Right.

That happened.

"I'm on my way back right now," he lies. "What's up?"

There's a considerable pause on the other side of the line. "Uh, we figured out a way to contact our friends. We're ready."

Oh.

Oh.

"I'll be there in ten minutes," Chuuya says and doesn't wait for a reply to hang up.

So now they have a way to get in contact with their friends.

Things are slowly progressing.

And he should probably get up so he can actually make it in ten, but instead, Chuuya's eyes get stuck on the sleeping man next to him. There's an uncharacteristic softness of youth on Dazai's face like this.

All his sharp edges somehow evened out. The pallor of his skin normal rather than deathless (but beautiful.) That cruel curve of his mouth buried under a relaxed expression.

It's easy to forget that he is only twenty years old sometimes.

Easy to forget that *Chuuya* is, too—or, something along those lines. His precise age is not a piece of information that he possesses.

Twenty-year-olds – those who do not come from a world of shadows and the endless night are usually at that stage of life where they move out of their homes, pursue an education, start jobs, date, find their sweethearts, right? It's all about migrating. Tumbling out of the nest that their parents built them to see whether they can fly on their own, and whether they can make it on their own.

For a moment, Chuuya wonders what they would look like in that kind of life. Whether they would complain about their nagging families and all the homework that they have to do and the places they cannot afford. He wonders whether they would still be like day and night, remarkably similar but from two separate worlds, passing each other on the street, not knowing that in another life they would wake up in the same bed together. Or maybe the universe would throw them together from the very start, make them grow up as best friends who live next to each other, sharing toys, secrets, then cigarettes and eventually lips.

That kind of life seems ridiculously mundane compared to this.

Yet for some reason, Chuuya doesn't find anything inside him that longs for that simplicity. Perhaps if he had grown up like that from the very beginning, sure. But he didn't. And he doesn't really want to either.

A sudden movement from the end of the bed tears his gaze away, his body tensing up only to release a surprised breath when a black furry thing comes up to him to greet him with a friendly head butt and a lot of purring.

"I didn't know you were here," Chuuya whispers, scratching Jiji's head with a grin. "I didn't even know your owner came back, can you believe that? Yeah, he's such a dick that he didn't even bother to wake me up even though it's the only reason I stayed here. How silly of him, right? Huh?" Jiji clearly agrees judging by the way she cranes her neck and purrs in reply. Such an intelligent little cat. "Although now that you mention it, maybe it's for the best," he continues in a

whisper-murmur, eyes sliding over Dazai's oblivious face once again. "Those naps aren't a good substitute for sleeping. Right, Jiji? Everyone needs to properly sleep, mafia boss or not. I'm *so* glad we're on the same page."

After a few more self-indulgent minutes, Chuuya makes himself slide out of bed only to discover that he has a problem when he catches a glimpse of himself in the bathroom. Bed hair and a few red splotches on his face aside, there is a glaringly obvious litany of bruises all over his neck. Impossible to overlook unless he pulls a turtle neck over his head.

He doesn't own any turtle necks.

Somehow, he doubts Dazai does either.

Now Chuuya is trying to make peace with the fact that he can't control everything, that he can't control most things in this life. The split with the sheep. His own path. The goals he once used to have. Not letting get Dazai under his skin.

He's trying.

But what he is not going to do is walk around like some kind of skank and parade his *hickeys* all over the port mafia. This is where he draws the line in the sand. No fucking way.

Glowering at his own treacherous reflection in the mirror, Chuuya thinks. Then an idea comes to him.

He sneaks back into the bedroom and… bingo.

Dazai's neck is covered by the familiar gauze once again.

He took it off when they were in the jacuzzi, stripped himself bare and didn't care whether Chuuya's eyes would linger on the various scars or the intricate designs of his tattoos that he bore, much like Chuuya didn't care whether Dazai saw his own collection of bruises and wounds littered over his body. But he must have covered himself up before he went out again, and that's going to save Chuuya now.

It's not an easy job to steal bandages from a sleeping man, especially not knowing how deep of a sleeper Dazai is. Chuuya hopes he is one, hopes that he has to be one what with how little of it he usually gets, but it's not guaranteed with a man like him. Somehow, he manages to pull off a decent strip of gauze, his chest burning with the need to

exhale, but right as the last stretch of it slips into his hands, his eyes land on a patch of skin below Dazai's ear.

It's barren, but the skin is a shade lighter than the rest, sticking out like an odd piece of a familiar puzzle.

Chuuya's hand subconsciously wanders to his own neck, finding that spot below the ear where a number was once inked into his skin. A number that made him an object, an experiment, a study. A number that stole the better part of his childhood. And a number that Chuuya removed at the age of thirteen with the help of his friends.

Dazai shifts in his sleep, letting out a long sigh, and Chuuya jerks back into action, climbing back on the bed, barely avoiding crushing Jiji in the process.

It might be nothing.

Just a trick of the light in the bedroom. Chuuya's own eyes deceiving him into seeing something that isn't there. It could also be something entirely else. Just because Chuuya once had a tattoo lasered away at the same exact spot on his neck doesn't mean that Dazai did too, let alone that he had the same numbers from the same place.

Then again…

It could be the key to the locked box of mysteries that he has been trying to get open for a while now.

Having his neck covered in bandages feels like Dazai staking his claim on him in an entirely different, layered way but if it at least means that no one will get to see the bruises hiding underneath, Chuuya's fine with it for now. Back in the clothes that he had to find and pick up from the floor in Dazai's office, he finally exits, pointedly ignoring the weight of the guards' eyes trailing after him, and makes his way down to his own apartment, only fifteen minutes later than he promised.

Whatever.

Executive duties.

The first thing that greets him is the rich smell of coffee hanging in the air after he closes the door behind him and shucks off his boots, then the familiar voices of Yuan and Albatross. It makes sense that he's still here considering what they must have been up to the entire

night, but Chuuya feels a skeptical frown settle between his brows as he follows the sounds to the living room where he finds the two of them around the table.

Yuan spots him first, her brows furrowing. “What happened to your neck?”

“Ran into some trouble while I was out,” he lies shamelessly and shrugs. “Nothing important. So you really found a way to contact them?”

“Hell yeah, we did,” she replies. “It took us an entire night and an ungodly amount of caffeine, but yes.”

“How?”

With a grin, Albatross leans back in the chair and drapes his arms around his back, looking like he’s been waiting for him to ask this question. “Well, we were thinking about how to best approach it, right? And Yuan said that they have this three-shift system going on – and I’ve been part of that system before! Before I joined this hellscape, you know? So what I remembered –”

“Never mind, doesn’t matter how you came up with it. Just tell me how it works,” Chuuya cuts in.

“All right, all right, boss,” Albatross agrees all too easily.

Chuuya scoffs. “I’m not your boss.”

“Well, you’re an executive, so technically you outrank me. And you know, the whole married to the top boss thing.” After another flat look from Chuuya, the guy finally gets going. “Okay, okay, so it’s just this baby.” Meaning the crappy disposable phone in his hand. “You just call this number, and then you’ll get one of your friends on the other line.”

“Just like that?” he questions.

“Just like that.”

“What if their phones are being tracked?”

“Oh, their phones are for sure being tracked, but we took care of that, too. It’ll look like a call from the same area.”

Chuuya hums and glances up at the two of them. “Then let’s give ‘em

a call, huh?"

"Do it," Yuan says.

"Would be a waste not to," Albatross agrees.

Chuuya sits down, picks out Shirase's name, and waits. It rings several times before a tired, "yeah?" comes from the other end of the line.

"Hey. You want tea or coffee?" Aka the sheep's code for: are you alone right now or not?

"Oh, uh, tea," Shirase mutters out after a moment, the noise of shuffling and moving around in the background. "I want tea. At least I think so."

Chuuya gives him a minute to find somewhere quiet before speaking again. "You alright?"

"Sure, yeah. How did you… how is it that you're calling me right now?"

"Long story –"

"And it goes by the name: moi," Yuan pipes in.

On the line, Shirase curses softly. "I told you to get as far away as possible while you still had the chance. Do you know how dangerous this is? For you? For us?"

"Right, as if we would just leave you there to rot," she retorts dryly. "Don't you know by now that we'll always be there to clean up your mess?"

"We're doing this precisely because of how dangerous it is," Chuuya says instead of joining in on the teasing. It stings, feeling like the outsider when he used to be part of it but there are more important matters to worry about right now. "We're going to help you get away once and for all, but we have to work together. For real. I can't – *we* can't have anyone pulling on a different string this time."

"Don't get me wrong, I'd like nothing more than that, but how in the world are you planning on doing that? They're –" His voice lowers into a low hiss. "— hundreds. Hundreds of those freaks, and they have half of us hostage half the time."

Shirase rarely sounds so serious – even during grave situations – and

when he does, Chuuya knows that it's bad. Real bad.

"There might be a lot of them, but we have port mafia resources. It will come down to a fight between these two organizations eventually anyway. We're just trying to get you out before that."

A pause. "Port mafia. So… from the Bishop's Staff back to the mafia then, huh? I… I'm not sure the others will follow."

"You're not going back to the mafia. You're free to leave wherever you want to afterwards."

"… Where's the catch?"

"There is none."

"I know you think I'm stupid, Chuuya, but even I can tell that it's bullshit. There's always a price to pay and it's never a small one."

Chuuya's eyes slide over to Yuan. So she never told the sheep about the choice that Dazai gave them. The choice that he didn't tell them about which ultimately led to this mess.

Sighing, he rubs a hand over his face. "The only price to pay is answering a few questions about what you saw and heard there. That's it. I swear."

"Shirase, you're not really in a position to doubt our motives right now anyway," Yuan adds, her voice uncharacteristically gentle. "We want to help, so *please*. Don't waste what little time we have to talk right now to fight us. We're all on a clock here."

"Fuck," Shirase mutters and then curses. "Fuck, fine. Okay. We're doing this."

"You have to make sure the others want this as well," Chuuya tells him. "Think you can do that?"

"I think all of us would do anything to get out of here."

"Even De Luca?"

There is a brief pause. Then: "*Especially* him."

"You sure?"

"I'll make it sure."

“Good. Now tell us about the shift system. Is there any way to break it up somehow? Any times when all of you are together?”

“No chance,” is the grim answer. “They’ve got us on an eight-hour rotation. I haven’t seen some of them since we left.”

That’s not good. Especially if communication is necessary for any of this to work.

“What about when you, I don’t know, clock in? Do you see the others? Even if only for a minute?”

“One group starts half an hour before the other one ends. And no one works at the same place. I’m telling you these sons of bitches are crazy smart.”

It does pose a problem. There is no way they would leave anyone behind, but getting them all together would be impossible like that… if they hadn’t mafia resources.

“What if the Bishop’s Staff *thinks* one group is there even though they aren’t?” Chuuya asks at the same time as a door opens somewhere in the apartment. He doesn’t have to turn around to guess who it is. That minuscule shift in the air is enough to give him an answer. Though he does silently raise his brows at Albatross who just shrugs.

“I guess.” Shirase sounds unconvinced. “How’d you do that?”

“I know an ability user that can create clones.” Maybe Dazai casually sidling up to him with a… smoothie in his hand isn’t a bad thing at all. Chuuya shoots him a narrow-eyed look. “That Giyu guy’s still alive, right?”

“Of course,” Dazai says with a glance that suggests it’s absurd to even ask. “I’m resourceful.”

Chuuya rolls his eyes but his sigh is a pleased one. “Giyu pretends to be the sheep, and not only that, he’ll get us some valuable information about the Bishop’s Staff,” he adds for Dazai’s benefit.

“And then what? We just flee?”

“Then w*e* run these motherfuckers to the ground, and you run, yeah. I doubt you’ll be their biggest problem once we get to them.”

“Okay,” Shirase says. “Okay. That actually sounds good. Tell me what

to do."

"Most important thing right now is to get everyone on board. I don't care how you do it, but you need to get it done. Preferably as soon as possible. Then we'll decide on a time and place."

"Got it. Anything else?"

Chuuya comes up short.

Yuan helps out. "Stay safe for now. Lay low. Don't do anything stupid."

"Yeah, will do." He goes quiet, but his silence is thick, ready to burst. "Guys?"

"Yeah?" Chuuya says.

"Thank you. Really."

Chuuya opens his mouth to reply with something casual, yet all his words get stuck in his throat, refusing to leave. Maybe it's the bittersweet knowledge that this comes way too late. Maybe it's something like closure. Whatever it is it leaves him quiet, only able to offer awkward silence in return.

"Thank us when we actually pull this off," Yuan replies with her gaze fixed on Chuuya. "You can reach us over this phone anytime in case something's up, 'kay?"

"Okay. Talk to you soon."

And with that the line goes quiet.

"Say Chuuya," Dazai's voice suddenly invades the silence, "what happened to your neck?" As if the question isn't already bad enough, he even tugs at the stolen bandages covering the embarrassing array of bruises under there.

Chuuya slaps his hand away and rises to his feet. "Got bitten by a stinky dog."

"I thought you injured yourself during the mission?" Albatross says, ever so helpful.

"Mission?" Dazai echoes. "Then how did you have time to –"

“What are you doing here anyway?” Chuuya cuts in with a glare in his direction before striding to the kitchen to find something to eat. “I don’t remember inviting you.”

“I called the boss before you showed up,” he hears Albatross say.

“Because I am *the boss.* I can show up here whenever I want, not to mention that you still have to report to me.”

“I can report to you in your office. There’s no need to show up here just for that. But now that you’ve heard everything, you can – *shit!”* Chuuya involuntarily jerks when he turns back from the fridge only to be met with Dazai already there. “Stop following me.”

“Stop stealing my bandages, little thief.”

“That was – I was – it was an emergency!”

The gleam in his smirk is nothing but amused as Chuuya pushes past him to slap some food on the counter. Yuan and Albatross are still back at the table, murmuring between themselves.

“Drink this,” Dazai tells him, shoving his pink smoothie towards him.

“No, thank you.”

“Why not? It tastes good. I promise.”

“So why don’t you drink it yourself?”

Dazai’s brows furrow flatly as he lifts the cup and slurps around the straw.

“Whatever,” Chuuya mutters. “I’m not thirsty right now.”

“Hm, suit yourself. Personally, it’s my favorite way of starting the morning. Besides coke, that is.”

It draws a snort out of him. “Maybe you wouldn’t need coke in the morning if you, you know, actually slept through the night.”

“I slept tonight just fine,” Dazai murmurs, his tone suggestive as he casually leans against the counter and watches Chuuya chop leeks.

He decides to play along, though he keeps his eyes on the cutting board the entire time. “Then maybe you should replace coke with me.”

“But Chuuya, the drugs help me stay awake. You put me to sleep. That would be rather counterproductive.”

“Is sleeping regularly really so bad?” he mutters. “You know that it’s not good for your body, right? At the rate you’re going, you’ll probably die in, like, five years.”

Dazai’s shoulder lifts in a half-shrug. Placing his now-empty smoothie on the counter, he lets out a content sigh. “I wasn’t planning to stick around for that long anyway.”

“That is not fine,” Chuuya says with a frown, shooting him a look. “That’s bullshit.”

A shadow of confusion flickers over Dazai’s face, but before he can respond – with something annoying, probably – Albatross comes over and slaps both of his hands on the other side of the counter, wearing a grin that promises he’s up to no good.

“You ready for tonight, Chuuya-kun?”

Chuuya blinks at him. “Hah?”

“You agreed to come drink with us, remember?”

“Oh. That’s tonight?”

“Yup. You’re free, right?” Annoyingly enough, Albatross looks at Dazai. “He’s worked hard enough to deserve a day off, boss.”

He grits his teeth when Dazai pats his back, simpering. “I don’t have any plans for Chuuya tonight, so he’s all yours.”

“What if *I* have plans?” Chuuya mutters.

“What plans?” Yuan asks, joining the round and stealing a piece of tomato to plop it in her mouth.

“Just… plans.”

She tilts her head. “So you’re free?”

Exhaling, he gives up and grumbles out a, “Fine, I’m free.”

“Yes!” Albatross whoops, even pumping a fist into the air. “Good, then I’ll see you two tonight! I’ll text you the address.”

“By the way,” Dazai says, turning to him on his way to follow Albatross, “the Colonel wanted to see you. That’s why I came here.”

“What? When?”

Dazai makes a show of looking at the silver watch around his wrist before shooting him a sly smile. “Now?”

He leaves before Chuuya can throw a knife at him.

That fucker will be pissed, but if he’s going to be late anyway, then Chuuya might as well finish his breakfast before having to listen to his bitching. Grumbling under his breath, he goes back to preparing his food. Yuan silently watches him before she eventually asks, “so did you spend the entire night fucking or what?”

“No comment,” Chuuya replies, pointedly not looking at her.

“Hey, if that’s what puts the man into such a tolerable mood, then I’m not complaining. He didn’t shoot me a single dirty look, can you believe that?”

“That’s because he’s actually not that bad. He’s just like us, you know. Just a guy.”

The pointed silence he receives in return is more than telling what Yuan thinks about that.

Chuuya can’t really blame her. It’s hard to believe that when she barely spends any time with Dazai, not as much as he does. Not like it matters anyway in the long run. She won’t have to work with and under Dazai for much longer.

“Anyways, I’ll take a big ass nap, so I won’t fall asleep tonight,” she announces, a yawn cutting her end-syllable short.

“Drinking with port mafia members, hm?” he can’t help but point out.

“I can have friends! Besides, making a few connections will be really useful.”

“That’s what I thought too and then you all –”

“Good night! Wake me up once it’s time to drink!”

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After another grueling but, at least, productive meeting with the Colonel and his team of subordinates he oversees, more paperwork regarding his own gem operations, and a back-and-forth negotiation with the cloning ability user Chuuya finds himself actually looking forward to a night out with both Yuan and the company that Albatross mentioned. It's been a while since he sat down to just drink – without the goal of drinking himself into a stupor but simply to have fun and relax.

Yuan's already awake when he comes home, and they have a small dinner together before throwing on some casual clothes – in Chuuya's case he only leaves the harness behind and adds a leather jacket – and letting his assigned driver take them to the address that Albatross sent them.

Their destination is an old brick billiard bar in a residential district, the words "Old World" written in pale letters on its signboard, the tubes holding the sign up lit up in bright neon pink. Chuuya has the vague feeling that he's already been here before. Maybe with the sheep? Then again he has never been greeted with five barrels of gun pointing straight at them the moment he pushes the door open.

"No strangers allowed inside," a man says, the muzzle of his pistol pressed up against Chuuya's head.

"But if you're fine with becoming corpses, you're more than welcome to come in," another man says as his sawed-off shotgun ends up against Yuan's temple.

"Wasn't it a bit careless to come without any guards, Mr. and Mrs. Sheep?" yet another man asks. His pistol points at Chuuya's chest.

"Even you can't protect yourself from an attack when you're surrounded like this," another man says and places a small revolver about the size of his palm against Yuan's neck.

"Now what you'll do, Mr. Invincible Gravity Wielder? If you hurry up and beg for mercy, I'll make sure to kill you comfortably," the last man, who stands in front of Chuuya, says and aims his long-barreled rifle in between Chuuya's eyebrows.

With a flat look in his eyes, Chuuya headbutts the gun between his brows. It splinters to pieces with a resounding crack in the air, and triggers open fire. Instead of bullets, variously colored confetti strings shoot out of the barrels.

“Chuuya! Yuan! Welcome to your first official night in the ‚Young People’s Association” group!‘”

He shares a bewildered look with Yuan before looking around at all the men. “This your shitty idea of a joke?”

“Kind of cheesy,” Yuan comments, planting one hand on her hip, “but I like it.”

“Ha! I knew you’d think it’s funny,” Albatross exclaims and promptly nestles himself between the two of them to throw his arms around their shoulders and direct them forward.

“I didn’t,” Chuuya mutters under his breath.

“Anyways, quick introduction round! This is Pianoman.” He jerks his chin towards the tall guy in a black overcoat and a long, white hakama. Chuuya has already met him a few times though they’ve never exchanged more than ten words altogether. “He came up with the association. Super crafty guy.”

Pianoman inclines his head and raises his drink in reply.

“Association?” Chuuya hears Yuan ask. “I thought we’re just getting a few drinks.”

“Technically, we’re all part of a benefits society,” Pianoman explains. “And technically, that’s only mafia-inclusive but thanks to someone –” A pointed glance in Albatross’ direction. “— we made a little exception tonight, so no pressure. We’re just here to have a good time.”

“The only rule is to get hammered,” Albatross agrees, all cheer and wagging tail. “Next up we have Doc. You both already met him, right?”

The man in question for some reason has IV pole attached to himself, though his sickly appearance doesn’t stop him from smiling brightly. “How’s your neck, Chuuya-kun? All healed?”

“It’s been fine for weeks now,” Chuuya replies diligently. “Told you my ability works fast.”

“And you?” Doc’s bleary gaze finds Yuan. “Any troubles?”

“Uh, nope, all good.” A small pause. “I mean, I have this mole on my

arm that I'm sometimes worried about but –"

"I can take a look. If we're lucky you'll be patient 887."

"Okay…?"

"I'm Lippmann," the next guy says in an attempt to steer the conversation away from the medical talk. His grin is as seductively sweet and infuriatingly charming as Chuuya remembers from that day he came to make a deal with the sheep to save Shirase from prison. "I see that you've guys cleaned up nicely since we last saw each other."

"Hey, you're that guy who reached out to us back then," Yuan exclaims.

Lippmann nods, touching his cheek. "You remember correctly, little lamb."

"Why'd they send you to strike the deal anyway?" Chuuya frowns skeptically. "Aren't you some kind of movie star?"

Yuan gasps. "Oh my god, that's why you looked so familiar back then!"

The more talk there is about him, the more the man seems to blossom out like a flower in the spring, his already disgustingly dazzling smile growing even more magical. Some people are truly born to live in the spotlight. "Why but of course because the boss knows that I'm one of the best people to negotiate with." His smoldering eyes crinkle as they land on Chuuya. "I mean, you agreed, didn't you?"

"I'd have agreed even if that one came to talk to me," he deadpans with a nod in the last man's directions. Iceman if he remembers correctly. The asshole who beat him up on his first day in the mafia. On behalf of Dazai's orders, but still.

"I doubt that," Lippmann says, making a face. "Iceman's not exactly a man of many words."

"That's not always a bad thing," the man in question remarks calmly, casting a look in Chuuya's direction. "Some people appreciate the dirty truth over beautiful lies." So his blank-faced exterior wasn't an act bad then. He's still as cool as the night, absorbing everything rather than radiating any distinct personal ambitions.

"He has a point," Chuuya agrees despite the stubborn flame of pride

inside him flickering dangerously. Slipping out of Albatross' grip around him, he dusts off his leather jacket before shooting an impatient scowl into the round. “Now can we do what we actually came here for, or what?”

It’s less chatter and more drinking after that, though with a group like this, there’s still more than enough talking to last Chuuya a lifetime. Once he orders himself a glass of red from the gentleman working the bar, completely unaffected by the things he sees and hears here, he mostly listens – and these people have *a lot* to tell.

It’s not what one would expect from a bunch of mafiosi, no less from the high-ranking ones and most of them *are,* but then again it’s not that surprising if one considers their ages, all of them still below 25 years old and the fact that none of the stories out of their mouths are classified material: rumors, personal achievements, escapades, anecdotes – those kinds of things.

“Our actual name is *Flags*,” Pianoman says with a teetering whine in his voice that most likely stems from the drinks Albatross keeps sliding into his hands – Chuuya tried one and almost choked when it was 90% vodka. How Albatross ended up behind the bar counter, he doesn’t know anymore, just that the bartender doesn’t mind the break judging by the relaxed expression on his face as he follows the game on the TV instead, taking drags of a cigarette every now and then. “I tell you guys every single time and you never remember.”

Lippmann makes an exaggerated face as he sets his glass back down. “I’m sure we would have known by now if you had ever told us.”

Sparked by drunken stubbornness, Pianomann whirls around to Doc who has been occupied with the mole on Yuan’s arm for the last ten minutes. “You have to remember! It was one of the first things I told you about it when I invited you to join *The Flags!”*

“Heh, my friend, I’m pretty sure I was on mushrooms that night. I only found out that I joined this society two weeks later.”

“That’s why you didn’t show up to our first meeting?”

“How did you come up with the idea to start this thing anyway?” Chuuya asks and takes a sip of his wine. “It sounds a lot like a small organization… in another big organization.” If he didn’t know Dazai and how lax he is about most things, he’d even go as far as saying that creating fractions like these could be considered suspicious.

“It’s less of an organization and much more of a mutual aid circle precisely because of how *big* the port mafia is,” Pianomann tells him. “Most people go their whole life without even meeting 98% of the other members here.”

Chuuya raises his brows. “And that’s such a bad thing?”

“Not bad but boring,” Albatross chimes in as he presents his next atrocious experiment of a drink. Yuan is the one who volunteers to try it out this time. “Imagine how sad your night would be without us right now!”

“No offense,” Chuuya says, “but this is the most normal evening I’ve had in a while.”

Albatross makes a face, but Pianoman only smiles knowingly. “Your circumstances are different of course, Chuuya-kun. However, if you were anyone else, it would have taken you significantly longer to not only form connections but rise through the ranks.” He shrugs. “Not everyone wants that. Some people only join to make ends meet. But when I realized that my gigs could be a hundred times more worth than the bachelor's degree I was studying for? I decided to create a network that would help me achieve that.”

“I joined because I get to save a lot more patients thanks to everyone here,” Doc adds. “Just look at Yuan-chan. I’m now one number closer to becoming God.”

“You said that my mole was perfectly fine.”

“And I saved you a lot of psychological stress because of that. Do you know how many diseases are caused by stress?”

Lippmann lets out a dainty sigh. “I joined because no society would be complete without a movie star. My connections and influence are worth millions of yen.”

Albatross slurps on his straw and says, “didn’t you have to ask to get invited?”

“Didn’t you come back alive last week only because your captors happened to be fans of mine?”

“That’s…” He trails off with a faint flush on his cheeks, one that’s not caused by the liquor he’s been inhaling. “… something I’m very grateful for, yeah.”

“I would have invited you earlier but I wasn’t sure whether associating with such a known celebrity like you was worth the risk,” Pianomann admits, shooting the actor a layered smile that hides more than it shows. “You walk a fine line every time you’re out in public. Can’t blame a guy for being careful, right?”

“Darling, you should have realized that my profession made me even better of a liar than anyone else here.” When Lippmann’s mouth curves into an even more smoldering smirk, Chuuya turns away, suddenly feeling like he’s watching something that’s not meant for outsider's eyes.

On the other side of the bar, Albatross is currently busy explaining his origin story as well. “— apparently heard that I was a *promising* young talent with potential -- jokes on them all because I’ve been here the longest – and so I thought to myself *why not?* I’m mostly here for the drinks though.”

A little concerned, Chuuya watches Yuan take several sips from her glass without even batting an eyelash. He steals it to take a sniff when she sets it down.

“Oi, get your own! Not like there aren’t enough to go around.”

But Chuuya holds onto it like a lung – at least, until he gets a decent sip in, only to turn to Albatross with an accusing scowl. “Why did my drink taste like pure absinthe while this one’s actually good?”

“I thought you said you liked yours?”

“That’s not… that’s not the point.”

“You have wine, Chuuya. Stop complaining.” The look Yuan sends him is more than just that though – there’s a hidden message in it that he only frowns back at, slightly puzzled. “You’re twenty,” she says, turning her attention back to Albatross. “How long could you have even been here?”

Leaning his elbows against the counter, Albatross starts visibly counting in his head. “Eight… no, nine years?”

Yuan stares back at him. “You joined when you were eleven?”

“How old were you when you joined the sheep?”

“… seven.”

Albatross makes a *see? We're not so different* hand gesture before nodding at Chuuya. "What about you, Mr. King Of The Sheep?"

"Seven," he replies even though he rolls his eyes at the nickname. That's obviously not true anymore. Just like his age might not be true – he has no idea whether he was actually seven at the time of his first memory. It just was the age that fit the most convenient at that time.

"We should form our own society. The society of… young ducklings thrust into the big bad world."

"I mean, our organization was at least run by other kids our age," Yuan murmurs. "We took care of each other. I doubt this place here was the same for children."

Albatross shrugs. "It was better than the streets during the war. I had a roof over my head, something to do, and hey, there were other kids too. There was Dazai!" He shakes his head like he said something wrong. "Though Dazai has always kept more to himself even back then." After taking a sip of his drink, he huffs, "*Even* when he was a *Flag* too."

"Ha!" Pianomann shouts from their side. "So you do use the name!"

But Chuuya's attention is stuck on something else. "Dazai was part of this society? Our Dazai?"

"The one and only," Albatross confirms with a nod. "For two years, actually. Then he became all our boss and –" His hand flips through the air. "— then he had no more time to go out for drinks with us every other week anymore."

Somehow Chuuya can't imagine Dazai being part of the Flags. Sitting where he sits right now, a glass of… whiskey in front of him, and chatting with these loud, slightly overbearing people. Then again he can hardly imagine Dazai anywhere outside the cave he made for himself on the top floor of the tower.

Or in a courtyard, surrounded by a sea of roses and thorns.

Or in Chuuya's apartment, casually cooking and bringing him plates to his table.

Or looking out of the window on an airplane.

Or seated around a chabudai, discussing his past with a family friend,

his eyes two endless burning embers.

Blinking himself out of his head and back to the present, Chuuya clears his throat and raises his glass to his lips to replace his thoughts with the pleasant heat that the wine produces in his chest.

“ – and he spent some time living on my couch. It was fun! It was like we were roommates in one of those college films, ya know?”

Chuuya narrows his eyes at the scrap of information. “Dazai lived with you?”

Two pairs of eyes turn to stare at him. Then Yuan bumps his leg under the bar counter, an amused grin on her face. “We’re talking about Iceman. Keep up.”

“Oh,” Chuuya mutters, weakly snapping his finger against the counter. “That’s… still an odd combination. I’d probably kill myself if I had to hear you talk 24/7 to me.”

Another bump.

This time he shoots Yuan a scowl.

She replies with another look that he can’t discern right now.

“I didn’t try to kill myself, but I sure tried to kill him,” Iceman offers flatly from the end of the bar. He’s kept to himself mostly, only indulging in a few of Doc’s antics now and then. Of all the people to most relate to, it happens to be *him*.

“Someone has to talk when you’re not willing to do it, and I’m always happy to volunteer as a tribute! It’s about *balance*, dude.”

“Still made me want to kill you.”

“Wow. Sorry, but I’m not so weak as to be killed by the likes of you. I’d cut off your hands before –” The grin on his face only widens when he soundless whips out the blade of a Kukri from the bottom of his jacket, slashing it through the air like it weighs nothing before stabbing it into the bar counter. “-- you could even look around to find something to hit me with.”

Yuan steals the knife to inspect it curiously.

Iceman only leans back and shrugs. “I’d just smother you while you’re asleep.”

Chuuya flicks a coin at Albatross, drawing a small yelp out of him when it lands with the impact of a shoe. Though he looks rather fascinated when he rubs the spot on his arm than upset. “Nice aim.”

“Please, that’s *nothing*.”

“By the way, I had no idea where the boss lived back then, so he certainly didn’t room with me,” he says and tosses the coin back to Chuuya. “I still don’t know where he lives.”

Chuuya squints. “You don’t?”

“Are you insane? Why would I?”

“Why not?”

Albatross tilts his head, looks at him for a moment, then shrugs. “His place is like a state secret. Just like what he’s hiding under the bandages… and pretty much everything else about him.” His head lifts to stare dreamily at the ceiling. “Sometimes I think he lives in the walls of the HQ.”

“Yeah, Chuuya,” Yuan murmurs in a voice that’s only audible to both of them and elbows him. “What is he hiding under the bandages?”

Unfazed, he swirls the glass of wine between his fingers. “I *wonder*.”

It’s not his place to tell anyone any of the things that Dazai chose to share with him. And even if it was, he still wouldn’t. He gave up quite a few secrets of his own to get even a glimpse under the man’s skin. There’s no way anyone here deserves the same.

Yuan clicks her tongue. “Tch. Hoes over bros?”

Chuuya just shakes his head.

“I don’t think he lives in the walls but I’m positive he has ears everywhere,” Pianoman joins in, more than a little tipsy by now. Then his eyes widen ever so slightly and he mouths, “even here.”

“I bet it’s Sota,” Lippmann whispers into the round, shooting a not-so-subtle look towards the bartender who is still immersed in the game.

“Or, just basic surveillance,” Yuan suggests dryly.

The only thing that comes from Doc is a snore since he passed out with his face mushed against the counter ten minutes ago.

“I say it’s Chuuya,” Iceman is the last one to say, and suddenly all of their heads slowly turn to him, wiping his amused grin off his face.

“Hah?” he grunts out with a glare. “What’s there to look at?! I’m not anyone’s damn spy! *You* were the one who invited me!”

“But you are, you know…” Pianoman inclines his head “.. *married.”*

“So?”

“Their marriage is irrelevant,” Iceman retorts even though he was the one to bring it up in the first place. “But he’s still by far the closest to the boss. It just makes sense if it were you.”

“How’d you know who I’m close to or not?” Chuuya sneers before thinking better of it. It’s just funny that such a statement comes from him of all people when he’s never even been around the two of them. Or, probably never even met Dazai outside of this bar.

Iceman takes that question in stride though. “I’m a hitman. Listening to people’s chatter is what I do.”

“Then you should know that sometimes chatter is just chatter.”

“Is it though…” Albatross murmurs.

“Remember the fuss the boss made when Ace had Chuuya?” Pianoman chuckles into his hand before reaching out to pat Chuuya on the back. “Hey, a lot of people can only dream of being the boss's favorite. It’s not a bad thing.”

Lippmann makes a tiny noise of disagreement. “Disputable.”

“What’s there not to like?” Albatross questions. “I was the boss’ favorite before Chuuya stole my spot and I liked it!”

That earns him a chorus of exasperated groans.

“First of all, you were hardly his favorite,” Lippmann says and silences his rebuttal with a raised index finger. “Second of all, it comes with a lot of expectations and not a lot of room for errors.” Half-leaning against the counter, he gestures towards Chuuya. “Don’t get me wrong, Chuuya-kun. I have heard and seen how good you are, but the boss is better. Almost inhumanly so, in that sense. It’s a challenging pace to keep up with.”

“The easiest way to survive in the mafia is to be good enough to stay

but not good enough to raise any attention," Iceman adds quietly, eyes resting on his drink.

Chuuya huffs out a breath, torn between barking out a laugh and rolling his eyes. At the end of the day, all that Dazai is to these people – even to the ones that he's apparently known for years now – is a distorted image – one that he constructed around himself to keep everyone at an arm's length. There are pixels of the truth in there, flickering like static noise, but it's still not the real thing.

Dazai is brilliant, there's no doubt about that. Diabolically sharp, quick, and creative. But he's still human. He still bleeds. His skin still scars. He needs copious amounts of drugs to get through the day, for fuck's sake. And the only challenging thing about being close to him is that it's never actually *close*, not really, and there are definitely no unreasonably high expectations.

But that is the point. It's what Dazai *wants* them to believe – that he's some kind of inhuman god. It's one of the pillars keeping him high up in the air. Untouchable. Invincible.

And as much as Chuuya sometimes likes to knock him down a peg or two, he suffers from an odd lack of interest in creating any cracks in his armor.

He raises his brows into the round. "Maybe it's not the smartest thing to say all these things in front of the person that you believe to be his rat."

The air prickles with tension.

Then Albatross bursts into laughter and everyone suddenly follows suit. Chuuya's not sure what's so funny, but the noise is infectious, drawing a half-puzzled, half-tipsy grin out of him as well.

"That was a good one, Chuuya. Really." Chest still shaking with laughter, Albatross slaps the bar counter. "I'm glad we're all vibing on the same wavelength."

"Hey, are you interested in dipping your toes into the movie industry? I could introduce you to some people."

"I'll pass."

"Pity. We could have become Uzuamasa's new dream team. I bet the fans would have loved you."

“Actual executives have no time for any acting gigs, Lippmann.”

“And movie stars don’t need to strive for an executive role for a good paycheck. I’m fine with that.”

“Wait, why’d you join the mafia then?”

“I was bored. I thought it could be fun.”

“That’s it?!”

“Why not?”

“Didn’t you ever stop to worry about the risks you’re taking?”

“Oh, darling. There’s so much that you don’t know about the movie business.”

“Huh…”

Over the course of the new few hours, there are more drinks and more stories. Chuuya finds out that for a long time the Flags only knew Dazai as *the demon prodigy* and that it took them almost two years to find out that he was Dazai Osamu, the young guy they sometimes saw hang around in odd bars – and the guy that Albatross had more or less seen grow up alongside him. Once he joined, he still kept mostly to himself, listening to the Flags rather than sharing anything personal. Apparently, his only few contributions were the times he instigated arguments between them, then sat back to watch them unfold.

It's childish, kind of evil, and very much in character.

The name of the former boss, Mori, falls too, something about how he kept Dazai on a tight leash during his reign, though it’s hard to overlook the way their faces grow more serious at that topic, their words shorter and the memories that are shared fewer.

Chuuya doesn’t have any exact details on what happened when Dazai took over the mafia, but he can imagine that any coup of this kind must be a delicate topic. Even two years later.

It’s a fun night all in all. Different from drinking with the sheep – not necessarily better because the Flags, at the end of the day, are still mostly strangers and one single night out doesn’t make them family, not the way the sheep were for him, but it’s not worse either. Here, Chuuya can drink as many glasses of wine without the knowledge that

he still has to look after his friends sitting in the back of his head. He doesn't have to take care of anybody. Instead, the Flags even try to take care of him.

Not that Chuuya lets them.

"I am perfectly fine to stand," he says, words not at all slurred, as he demonstrates his ability to walk without any hiccups. "See? All good."

Lippmann's body is twisted all funny when he looks at him. "Darling, you're standing on the ceiling."

Chuuya purses his lips. "But I *am* standing."

"And no one here doubts that you can. We were just against the idea of you getting on any bikes like that."

"Come on, Chuuya-kun," Pianoman calls and earnestly slaps his thighs like he is calling his damn dog to him. "Down now."

"I'll even catch you, don't worry," Lippmann tells him.

"Tch. As if I need any of you to catch me."

"Hey, Chuuya," Iceman says then, holding up a bag of wasabi nuts that he opened earlier. They make Chuuya's eyes water, and he's pretty sure he heard one of his teeth crack while munching on them, but they're also more addicting than crack cocaine. "Want one?"

Chuuya lands back on the floor with a slightly overcalculated impact, the ground shaking under his feet as he steadies himself and expectantly reaches for his well-deserved snack. Iceman's mouth curves ever so slightly, the shadow of a smile appearing there, and for some reason, Chuuya feels a surge of pride in his chest.

He did that.

He can do a lot of things.

"Okay, driver's gonna be here in two minutes," Albatross announces when he comes back, Yuan in tow. Her face is carefully schooled into a neutral expression, her hair pulled into a high ponytail, her clothes as clean as ever, but her eyes are glassy as fuck. Chuuya has known her for too long not to recognize that she's equally hammered right now, just in the quiet stage of the drunkenness.

(After the quiet one comes the one where she loses all her motor functions.)

So Chuuya stops protesting that they go home and quietly shoves as many wasabi nuts into his mouth as possible before the car gets here. He even lets Pianoman and Lippmann pull him into hugs outside of the bar despite the way his face twists into a half-cringe, half-wince, not really sure what he is supposed to do here either. And when Albatross insists to chaperone both of them home because they're both apparently incapable of doing so alone, then fine. Whatever. He can do that too.

He spends most of the ride home dozing and swimming in the turbulent ocean that his head has turned into, only blinking himself back to the mortal realm when the car pulls to a stop and someone opens the door next to him. Albatross pokes his head inside.

"Wakey, wakey, sunshine. Can you get out?"

Chuuya rolls his eyes. "Of course I can get –" His feet don't 100% cooperate with his head, so he more or less stumbles out of the car before he steadies himself with *for the tainted sorrow*. "My legs fell asleep," he explains when Albatross shoots him a look.

"Okay!"

Compared to him, Yuan's a little worse off. Usually, she can drink him under the table like a damn sailor and she *always* wakes up without even a hint of a hangover, bright and shiny, but on some occasions – like tonight – she surpasses a certain limit and ends up like… this.

"I can't walk," she half-whines with one arm over Albatross' shoulder. "The floor is trying to eat me…"

"Okay, how about I carry you? That okay?"

A miserable nod.

Chuuya watches Albatross stop them so he can slide one arm under her knees, the other under her back, then pick her up with a triumphant noise. Yuan's head lolls against his chest, eyes already falling closed.

He watches and something in his chest twists.

He watches and slides his eyes up, up, up towards the peak of the

black tower.

They don't receive as many weird stares as he anticipates, most of the other mafiosi that they encounter only shooting Albatross acknowledging smiles in passing. In the elevator, Chuuya leans against the wall, resting his head for a bit, half-listening to the slurred words coming out of Yuan's mouth every now and then.

Then he catches Albatross' smile at her, a soft, gentle smile, not the same bright one that he seems to wear like a permanent face mask, but small and more genuine in that way, and it makes him nearly sick.

Not with jealousy, not really.

Not with alcohol-induced nausea.

Not because he's against the two of them bonding.

But sick with something else. Something that he can't quite decipher right now.

(With longing.)

(He's sick with longing.)

When the elevator comes to a stop, Albatross walks out but pauses once he notices that Chuuya doesn't follow suit. He raises his brows. "You coming?"

"I need…" He clears his throat, tapping his fingers against his arm. "I need to make a quick stop up there first."

"Ha! So you are reporting to the boss?"

Chuuya rolls his eyes. "Shut up. There's just something I need to discuss with him."

"Uh-uh," Albatross sing-songs and walks off in the direction of the apartment.

Chuuya holds onto his scowl until the doors slide closed, then he presses his forehead against the wall and wills the world to stop spinning so madly around him.

He is a dirty liar.

There's nothing he needs to talk to Dazai about.

He's just feeling needy right now and if Dazai insisted on establishing that they can fuck whenever they want to, he might as well make use of it, right? Why deny himself when there's a perfectly fine body right there?

The hallways are as quiet and deserted as always, save for the stone-faced guards holding the fort in front of the doors.

"I need to see the boss." Chuuya wonders whether they heard him the last time he was here… exactly twenty-four hours ago, getting railed on the table. Jutting out his chin, he gruffly adds, "very urgent matter."

The guard on the far right side murmurs barely audible words into his earpiece. A minute later, he gives his colleagues a nod and they open the door for him to let him pass.

Most of the lights in the office are out, but the electric walls aren't shielding the windows so that the city lights and the moon shine a passage of gentle light into the room. If not for the fact that *someone* clearly let him in, Chuuya would feel bad for intruding and possibly disturbing Dazai's sleep. But the man's not sleeping.

He's stretched out over the length of the couch, a book in his lap, and a cat, his usual attire of slacks, button-up and coat discarded for a plain black turtleneck sweater and a pair of grey sweatpants –

"Hey."

"Hi." Chuuya forces his eyes away from the sweatpants to meet Dazai's eyes instead, no bandages that are covering one side of his face. And because he's already impatient before their stupid dance of teasing can even begin, he blurts out, "I'm horny."

Dazai blinks back at him. Then he sits up, one shoulder lifting in a half-shrug. "Hey, horny. I'm Dazai."

Apparently, that's too much moving for Jiji since he jumps off his lap to make herself comfortable on the other couch instead.

Chuuya understands her, really.

"Ha, ha, you're so funny. I'm dying of laughter," he mutters with a mock grin as he walks over and half-heartedly kicks the man's thigh

before climbing on top of him now that the spot is free. “Now, can you do something about it or not?”

Dazai’s amused smile lingers even when Chuuya settles down on his crotch with his full weight, though his gaze turns a shade more smoldering, liquid fire contained in two eyes. “How much did you drink?”

“Does it matter?”

“It does to me.”

“I don’t know. A bottle of wine maybe?” The longer Dazai just lies there, the more Chuuya’s stomach twists around itself, making his face scrunch into an involuntary pout. “I’m of sound mind, I promise…” His fingertips slip under the sweater, slowly tracing the length of his abs. “Please?”

“You,” Dazai murmurs, holding his gaze.

Chuuya’s head tilts.

Dazai finds his hand and squeezes it softly, not pushing it away but not letting it wander further either. “Are such a brat.”

“A brat you want to fuck?”

The curve of his smile is a promising *yes*, but the grip around his fingers is still a *maybe.* It’s odd but Chuuya doesn’t actually mind whichever answer he will get. For some reason, this alone, whatever it is, is enough too – even if he’ll never admit it to the bastard in front of him.

“Bring me a bottle of wine and two glasses, will you?” Dazai says then, nudging his chin in the direction of one of the cabinets behind him.

Chuuya releases a quiet huff but gets to his feet anyway. He spends a few minutes considering the many options before making a choice and grabbing two glasses**.** On the couch, Dazai has sat up, so that there is enough space for Chuuya to sit down once he pours both of them some wine – Dazai a lot, and himself just enough to have some weight in it.

Draping an arm over the couch so he can rest his cheek against it, he watches Dazai take a sip, his eyes resting on Chuuya as well, patient,

but also knowing, like he is waiting for something that he knows will come.

“I didn’t know you were part of the Flags once,” he says eventually.

Dazai doesn’t break eye contact, but he doesn’t speak immediately either. “Well, I used to be just a promising youth once. Of course they wanted me to be part of them.”

How very cocky.

“You didn’t like it?”

“I didn’t *not* like it.” A shrug. “I just didn’t care much about it. Just like I didn’t care much about most things back then.”

Chuuya hums before saying, “you cared enough to take over the port mafia.”

The gleam in Dazai’s eyes flickers for a few moments. “I guess so.”

“How did you go from being an executive to deciding that you needed to become the boss?”

“Chuuya,” Dazai says with that chortling tone of his, “you’re asking expensive questions.”

But all Chuuya does is look back at him. “Tell me anyway.”

Dazai examines him for a long moment, a thousand tiny calculations running behind those mars-brown eyes before he eventually mirrors Chuuya’s position, leaning the side of his face against his fist. “The former boss wasn’t awful. Not a bad leader anyway. But he had different priorities. I decided that mine were better.”

Chuuya knows that his answer is honest because it doesn’t paint him in a better light. It’s selfish. It’s simple. It’s genuine.

“And were you right?”

“Don’t the numbers speak for themselves?” Meaning, the exponential growth of the port mafia’s influence in the last two years.

The look Chuuya shoots him is dry. “As if it was only about money and profit.”

Dazai’s expression wanes, shifting into something less confident and

more… uncertain. An odd, unfamiliar sight on him, making him appear five years younger than he is. That quiet, reserved child that the Flags mentioned tonight.

“That remains to be seen yet,” he murmurs eventually. “I’m still working on it.”

The thing to do now would be to dig deeper, actually find out what those priorities of his are and whether they have something to do with why Chuuya’s here. Yet it’s not what his attention gets stuck on. Instead, Chuuya finds himself drinking in the rare flicker of vulnerability on Dazai’s face, torn between appreciating it and making it disappear because as satisfying as it is—as it *should be*—all he feels is pressure as his lungs tie themselves into knots.

“I used to have these… attacks as a kid. Like what happened in Osaka,” it bursts out of him. Chuuya leaves his glass of wine floating in the air as he sinks deeper into the couch, partly because he’s tired and partly because he doesn’t want to look at Dazai right now before he goes on. “I don’t remember much of my first few years on the streets but I know that they used to happen quite often. I’d get these sudden bursts of anger and rage and it felt like someone else – or something else had control over my body. It was loud and strong and powerful and there was nothing I could do about it because I had no idea what was happening. The sheep didn’t know either. And I just… I don’t know, I guess I endured it until it went away. At some point, I asked the sheep to lock me away and leave whenever it happened because I was afraid I’d end up hurting them. But it got better. And shorter. And we all kind of figured that it was just me not being able to control my ability yet.”

Once he comes to a tumbling stop, he sucks in a deep breath, every nerve in his body strung tight and feeling exposed, vulnerable.

Because it’s always about a balance between the two of them. One secret for another. One truth for another. And it’s a little horrible to just thrust this little secret of shame that he’s kept buried somewhere at the bottom of his chest for years out there, shine a light on it, and let Dazai and his attention for details take a look.

“But it wasn’t just your ability,” Dazai’s voice murmurs on the other end of the couch, “was it?”

And somehow it’s freeing too. So freeing that his next exhale shoots heroin through his veins.

Chuuya sinks even deeper into the couch, stretching out his legs until he accidentally hits Dazai and props them up again only for a hand to nudge them down so they can stretch out on his lap. Another breath. "I have full control over *for the tainted sorrow.* That's not what it was."

"Some abilities can be harder to master than others, but in the end, they're a piece of you, not the other way around. You're in control."

"I know," he murmurs, his voice so hoarse that it stings in the back of his throat. "But I'm not in control when *it* happens."

Dazai's fingers dig into the skin around his ankle, massaging it, and even though it should feel weird, all it does is let all the tension leak out of his body, making it easier to breathe. Chuuya swallows before winding an arm around his neck. "A few years ago I was obsessed with finding out what the hell's wrong with me. I… dug for answers, but the more rumors I came across, the less I started to want the truth. I don't know if I'll ever want to find out. Not sure it matters."

Then he lifts his chin to shoot Dazai a frantic look. "You know, don't you? Everything?"

"Not everything," he murmurs. "Bits and pieces that might or might not be useful to you."

"Tell me the truth," he says before he can stop himself. "Is it why you wanted me here? Has it something to do with that?"

What he isn't drunk enough to ask is: *Did that spot on your neck use to be a tattoo once?*

Chuuya swallows when Dazai meets his gaze and holds it. "No. It was never about that and never will be."

It sounds honest.

He doesn't think Dazai would lie about that, not when repeatedly told him that discovering the truth is only a matter of effort.

But the thing that makes Chuuya nod and accept it is that he *wants* it to be true, so desperately that his lungs tremble with it. So desperately that it hurts. "Okay," he says, eyes fluttering closed with a sigh. "I believe you."

Minutes pass; the only sounds in Chuuya's ears is his own breathing and the faint tick of the clock on the wall, until he eventually hears a

quiet, “thank you, Chuuya.” He’s not sure what for, not sure what they were even talking about just now, just that he’s warm and comfortable and there is this pleasant sensation coming from his feet, and for a moment in time, everything’s fine and nothing is wrong.

Chapter End Notes

The beginning of the scene with the Flags was obviously borrowed from the fan translation of Stormbringer! I thought about writing something a little different at first but I love the scene too much, so it just had to be included -- with Yuan in the mix, though! I hope you guys liked the chapter, excited to hear your thoughts and even more excited for the new few chapters! Thanks for all the love and support <3

Chapter 26 will have:
- a gift
- a bird
- and a cage

Chapter 26: Vogel Im Käfig

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Keep your eyes on your surroundings all the time. Don’t get distracted. Get in and get them out. For you, it’s an extraction only. That’s it.”

Chuuya rolls his eyes as Dazai secures the holster around his thigh. The sight of him down on one knee in front of him would be much better if he didn’t spend all of it giving him advice that he’s already heard a thousand times. “It could be a trap. Or two. Or three. I know.” He lets out an exasperated sigh. “We’ve been through this.”

“I’m just making sure Chuuya actually listens to me instead of salivating over me on my knees for him,” Dazai replies and lifts his gaze to him, the tips of his fingers resting on the inside of his thigh.

Chuuya’s eyes narrow.

Dazai raises his brow as if to say: *am I wrong?*

He isn’t.

“Shut up,” he mutters, kicking his knee. “It’s not my fault that you look so much better from up here.”

The hand squeezes Chuuya in admonishment, but the real punishment is Dazai taking that picture away from him by rising back to his feet and suddenly being one and a half heads taller than him again. “If you just listen patiently for a few more minutes, I’ll go down on my knees for you and let you do whatever you want for however long you want once you’re back.”

Well…

Chuuya would be an idiot to refuse an offer like this, right?

“It’s unbecoming for you to be so worried, but fine, whatever. Give me the speech *again* if that’s what makes you happy.”

They’re in Chuuya’s office, getting him geared up for the operation to extract the sheep after an entire week of planning, strategizing, and

preparing for it.

“It’s not only a mission to free the little lambs but also the opening to the attack in something that will quickly turn into a war. The first move matters.”

“Technically, Kyouka was your first move,” Chuuya points out with a sickly-sweet smile that he knows makes people’s blood boil. But Dazai only grins back, proud almost, and it’s Chuuya who ends up stifling an irritated growl.

“We have two moves, but this will be the first offensive strike, so my point stands. Those people are like ants. There are dozens of them, and right now we still don’t know who their queen is. If you have to engage in combat, then do it with the intention of disarming them and taking them alive. Check their mouths for any suicide pills. I’m 99% sure they are trained to take their own lives before giving anything away.”

It’s the tenth time Chuuya’s heard this before, but he nods diligently for Dazai’s sake – and his own, the one that will get rewarded tomorrow if everything goes well.

“Be wary of the sheep too. I know you say they wouldn’t betray you but you don’t know whether they’ve been found out or whether someone’s threatening them. Stay clear of De Luca.”

“Yes,” Chuuya forces out. Unlike what Dazai makes it sound like, he *is* aware of the possibility that the sheep have been turned against their will, and that this could be a trap. He doesn’t like it, but he knows. And he’s prepared for it.

“If that happens, fall back to the backup plans. You should have more than enough.”

“Okay.”

“They move like water, so be as fluid as it, too. Change directions if you need to. You’ll know best what to do when you’re there.”

“I already know what to do best.”

Dazai’s gaze is eerily somber though, making Chuuya’s armor of confidence twitch. “Don’t get cocky.” Before he can grumble out a reply, Dazai reaches into his pocket and fishes out something small and silver and slides it around Chuuya’s finger without even asking. A

ring. “Wear this at all times. Don’t take it off.”

“What, you’re not even going to propose first?” Chuuya jokes despite the way his heart staggers clumsily inside his chest. Dazai doesn’t want to marry him again, does he? Because that would be insane. It’s not like that between them. Not at all. Totally wrong.

Ignoring the comment, Dazai pulls something else out of his pocket. A silver compass this time. “Do you remember this?”

Chuuya frowns at it. It takes him a few moments to retrace it in his memories. Once he does, his eyes lift to Dazai. “You got it at the auction, didn’t you?”

“I did.”

“What’s it for?” He knows what compasses are for, but considering this one cost Dazai quite a fortune, it must have a more special other function than depicting cardinal directions only.

“The ring and the compass were made from the same material and by the same ability user.” Dazai draws his index finger over the compass before looking at Chuuya. “Where one goes the other follows. Which means that as long as you hold onto the ring, the compass will always be able to find you, and vice versa.”

Puzzled, Chuuya blinks. “You planning to go somewhere while I’m away?”

Dazai replies with a flat look.

“Gee, fine. I’ll wear it.” After he slips out of his leather gloves, Chuuya slips the ring around his finger even though the reason for wearing it is lost to him. It fits like a glove – pun not intended. “Why’d you make me swallow a GPS tracker in Osaka when you could have given me this instead?” he adds with a grumble.

At this, Dazai’s expression softens into a grin; his hands brace against the desk behind him. “I wasn’t yet in possession of it then. It took me years to find the compass, and even longer to get my hands on the ring.”

“Where do you even get wind of all this stuff?”

Compasses and rings that find each other. Dragon eggs. Super fast horses…

One might think that the underworld would mostly deal with dangerous weapons of mass destruction, not this random knick-knack.

“My father used to task me with finding all sorts of objects. These were among the ones I found too interesting to find for the man.” He shrugs. “Told him that they were at the bottom of the ocean somewhere.”

One of these days, Chuuya will have to dig up a thousand little truths about himself to finally hear more about Dazai’s family and his childhood. It sounds like quite the story.

He shoots the ring another glance before pulling the gloves back on and pulling his shoulders back, arms folded behind him. “I guess, since you went to all that trouble to find it, I can try to hold onto it.”

“Hm, best if you do,” Dazai agrees with a hum.

Chuuya waits for more backstory, or maybe another piece of advice that they have already been through—another excuse to stay here for a minute longer, but that seems to be it. For some reason, it makes his chest all tight and heavy. Probably mission-related nerves.

He forces out a breath. “I should go now. ‘s getting late.”

Eyes locked on Chuuya, Dazai nods.

“What, no last words?” he asks despite himself, an awkward smile clinging to his lips.

“You and I both know you don’t need them,” is the answer. “Or do you want to hear a *go give them hell* from me?”

Chuuya’s face twists into a cringe. Dazai is right. He neither needs nor wants to hear anything of that sort, so by all logic, he should just turn around and leave. For some crazy reason, he feels the urge to step closer and kiss Dazai instead.

Very crazy.

That’s not something they do. Not something they *are*.

Not outside of the bedroom anyway.

“Okay,” he says with a final nod. “See you later then.”

He turns around before hearing Dazai's reply. "We will."

***

"I've never been this high above," Karma shouts over the howl of the chopper engine. "This is so cool!"

Chuuya can't help but smile as the young boy plasters his entire face against the small window. Chuuya and heights go way back, so he can't say the same about himself, but he also can't deny that being this far above everyone else is cool. The view is pretty nice.

"Is this how every day feels for you, Nakahara-san?" Karma asks once he pulls away to look at him.

"I don't just use my ability to float around the city all day, you know."

"But when you do! Does it feel like this?"

Chuuya goes for a nonchalant shrug, though the grin that hides behind his schooled expression betrays him. "It's even cooler."

Karma practically bounces on his toes from excitement.

"This thing is decent," he continues, slapping the chunk of metal behind him, "but being this high with just your body and soul is something else entirely, trust me. It's nothing compared to this."

Karma's eyes flutter closed as he lets out a long, wistful sigh. "Do you think it's still possible to get an ability at fifteen years old?"

The other two men inside the chopper, part of the Colonel's team, share a glance at that. Chuuya's brows lower even though he should be used to this sort of reaction by now. Much like their team leader, the Colonel himself, his subordinates think a bit too much of themselves if you ask Chuuya—which is why he would have preferred to have his own team of people here, but alas.

Whether he wants to or not, he has to cooperate with the Colonel. Chuuya's subordinates are all part of this mission as well, just not in this particular faction. At least the Colonel's people are quite decent in the field, if not a little too trigger-happy–something that Chuuya doesn't mind as long as it's the Bishop Staff's members that they are pointing at and not the sheep.

Returning his attention to Karma, he shrugs. “It’s not impossible. I’ve heard of people inheriting a family member’s ability after they died. Maybe you’re lucky and one of your parents is an ability-user.”

“That happens?” Karma blinks and rubs the side of his neck. “I always figured my parents were dead… but maybe…” He glances at Chuuya. “Is it bad to want them to be alive just so I can inherit their potential abilities once they die?”

Chuuya huffs out a snort. “You don’t remember them, right? It’s okay to feel that way. Not like you knew those people.”

“But they were… or are my parents. I feel like that should mean something… but it doesn’t. Not really.”

Chuuya never met his parents either. He doesn’t even know if he has them. If he is someone that was naturally born or something that was… created. And even though he has no use for any of their abilities that they might have, he neither wishes they were alive or dead.

Only sometimes, on very rare—and drunk—occasions does he find himself wondering what kind of people he would stem from. But he’s long since found out that there is no use in philosophizing about what might or might not have been. The only thing it does is waste time.

“You can’t care about people that you don’t know, Karma.”

Karma’s nod isn’t any less conflicted but he seems to accept that it’s neither here nor there, taking another look out of the window. “I know not everyone thinks this mission is a good idea, Nakahara-san,” he says more quietly when he turns to Chuuya, keeping his words out of the reach of the Colonel’s soldiers. “But I think it’s honorable of you to help your friends even though…” He trails off, letting an awkward silence finish his sentence.

Even though they abandoned you and teamed up with the enemy.

It’s funny how fast news travels in the port mafia. It’s not like the sheep were ever part of any big operations during their stay, only assigned to the most basic jobs and mostly keeping to themselves, but apparently, word of their disappearance got out quickly. Dazai kept the fact that they joined the Bishop’s Staff under wraps because *that* would have caused an uproar, but the Colonel, his people, and Chuuya’s subordinates know about it. Even that is enough to have a lot of differing opinions clash like fire and ice.

Chuuya leans against the wall and cocks his head at him. “I guess you know a thing or two about wanting to save your friends no matter the costs, huh?”

“I would like to think so,” Karma mutters, dipping his chin to his feet. “But I only managed to do that because of you.” His big, round eyes glimmer with guilt as they raise to look at Chuuya. “And look where that got you.”

The sensation of charred flesh and electricity slicing him apart from the inside is so vivid that he has to clear his throat—and his mind—before speaking. “Ace died. I became an executive. Your friends lived. I don’t see anything wrong with that.”

“Thank you for that, Nakahara-san. For helping me save my friends and… and for helping *me.* Really.” A depthless shadow falls over Karma’s face. “I used to believe that I’d spend the rest of my life in that collar and that I would one day die in it too.”

“Well, I know a thing or two about that, too,” Chuuya mutters, flippantly kicking the flooring with the sole of his boot.

He doesn’t remember that life, not like Karma does, but sometimes he thinks his body remembers. The feeling of being trapped and chained like an animal is etched into his nervous system even though there are no clear memories to explain what it is that was done to him. Why he sometimes wakes up, gasping for breath like he just broke through the surface of the ocean. Why he feels someone — something else slumbering deep inside him. Why he woke without a sliver of identity except for his flesh and the gift to manipulate gravity. “I just think everyone should have the chance to decide what their life is going to be like. Ace didn’t seem like someone who gave you that chance.”

For some reason, Karma’s face flushes a deep shade of red, and he lifts his hand to his mouth, clearing his throat.

Chuuya raises his brows. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“C’mon, spit it out.”

“Nothing, I just… I remembered this dream that I used to have.” He shakes his head. “It’s kind of silly in hindsight.”

“What was it?” Chuuya asks because now that it’s out here, he wants

to know.

Karma looks like a deer caught in headlights. But Chuuya stares him down with that I'm-your-superior-stare he's been refining until Karma's chest eventually collapses with an exhale. "I wanted to become the next boss of the port mafia." As soon as the words are out, he grimaces, covering his eyes with one hand. "That's *so* embarrassing."

Chuuya just chuckles to himself though. "It's ambitious, that's for sure."

"Please forget I ever said that. And –" Karma lowers his hand to shoot him a pleading look. "—I hope you don't think I meant it in an *I want to overthrow the boss* kind of way. I'd *never* say th—"

"Relax, Karma. You dream big. Nothing bad about that." Chuuya tightens his claim with a self-assured nod. "That's something good. But yeah, best not to go around the Port Mafia saying that to anyone else." His gaze mechanically slides to the side where the Colonel's men are seated. The loud hum of the engine thankfully overshadows their murmured conversation. "Daz – the boss would probably find it funny, to be honest."

Considering how often Dazai complains about all his paperwork and how bored he is with his job, he might not even be against the idea of giving his title to someone else one day. In the far future, of course, but someday.

Karma's wide-eyed face in reply doesn't seem to share his view. "I don't think so, Nakahara-san. The boss *hates* me."

"He doesn't," Chuuya says. Then he remembers what Yuan told him about the events on the day that he spent on Ace's ship and his laid-back certainty wanes into a grimace. "I'm sure it's not, uh, personal."

Karma opens his mouth but closes it again a second later. "I understand where I went wrong that time, and I've been training to get better." His hands curl into fists by his sides as he dips his head. "And I'm not going to make the same mistake a second time. I won't disappoint the boss *or* you, Nakahara-san!"

Being on the other end of that kind of promise makes him shift uncomfortably on his feet. He isn't a leader or some kind of general that deserves this kind of devotion from his subordinates. He has done nothing to deserve it. And yet, deep down, he knows that it's good.

That it's necessary. That *this* is what wins people wars.

And this is what he lacked with the sheep.

Today's mission might only be an extraction in theory, but everyone who is part of it has been thoroughly briefed and prepped for all the ways it might deviate into a trap, a fight, an ambush. And if that happens–when it does–it will be easier to emerge successful if his people know what they are fighting for.

Even if that something is… him.

So he acknowledges Karma's vow with a nod.

And that's that.

The chopper will land in an open field, two kilometers away from the sheep's allotments where they have been staying for the past weeks. Team fox, the ground teams, are each responsible for fetching one fraction of the sheep and delivering them safely to the choppers. While they shouldn't encounter any problems picking up one-third of the sheep, getting the other two out will be more challenging due to their overlapping work schedules–all in different parts of the city, no less.

Chuuya will oversee that it works out from the rooftops, which is why, unlike Karma and the Colonel's men, he gets to his feet five minutes before they land.

Karma nods, and after a moment of hesitation, Chuuya ruffles the boy's hair. "Just like we planned, yeah? See ya in a bit."

He slides open the door of the chopper with three piercing stares drilling into his back, but neither that nor the heavy barricade of wind that meets him from the outside makes him falter as he steps towards the edge and peers down at the city below.

It should be terrifying to be one step shy of falling into endless depths and to know that there might be people down there waiting for him to fall into their trap.

Instead, an uncanny silence settles over him. It's like standing in the eye of the storm and seeing the destruction happening, but not being part of it.

Because this? This is something he knows. This is what he is best at.

The chopper passes one of the buildings that he memorized for this exact moment.

“That’s my cue,” he tells the team without looking back. “See you on the ground.”

And he dives head-first down.

Angling himself as straight as an arrow, he catapults through the air like lightning, the wind whipping harshly around him but also propelling him forward. It’s exhilarating. The only thing that comes close to this sort of rush is —

When he approaches the ground, he uses *for the tainted sorrow* to make himself lighter, so that he can change the direction of his body and land on top of a restaurant building with both feet. He forces back the urge to announce his arrival with a dramatic crack to avoid any unnecessary attention.

— Dazai.

Chuuya has to scoff at himself as he scans his surroundings, letting out a deep breath. There are the trailers that Yuan and Shirase told him about. Once he is sure that no enemy people are expecting him down there, he jumps off the building and –

“Chuuya!”

He only has time to blink and suddenly there are two small but tight arms wrapped around his waist. Chuuya’s eyes lower to see Shiro lifting his head to shoot him a toothy smile. “You came! I knew you would!”

All Chuuya can do is smile back, surprised and nervous at the same time, because the next moment the other sheep, Akira, Miso, Saya, and Sougo, are rushing out of the trailers and swarming him like some kind of celebrity. (Like they didn’t run *from him.)*

Out of the corner of his vision, he sees someone else come out too. Luca. *De Luca.* Though he stays a healthy distance away, a vacant veil in his eyes.

Chuuya deliberately turns his attention back to the others. “Hey kiddo,” he says, ruffling Shiro’s light-brown curls with a tentative smile. “Hey, guys.”

“Shirase said you’d come, but we didn’t think you actually would,” Akira blurts out with a shake of their head. “Not after –”

“I knew!” Shiro exclaims, still clinging to him.

Miso smiles a quiet smile. “You always do.”

Slightly overwhelmed by this unexpected welcome, Chuuya gulps down a breath of oxygen, almost grateful when he sees the Port Mafia truck come to a halt on the dirt road next to the trailers. “We’ll catch up later,” he tells them as he starts ushering them towards the truck. “Now you gotta go. Hurry. We have to be as quick and efficient as possible.”

They had a lot of communication and cooperation problems in the port mafia, but this — working together against *a common enemy* — they have always been good at. The sheep all pile into the truck, leaving most of their belongings behind in the trailers.

Chuuya wishes he was surprised to see that Luca is the only one who doesn’t budge, just… standing there like a useless piece of flesh.

“You’re going to make problems *even now?!”* Chuuya growls, and when that doesn’t earn him a response, only another empty look, he fists his hand in Luca’s collar. “Get in the damn truck or get left behind.”

He doesn’t anticipate hearing Luca murmur, “I was wrong. You were right. About them.”

Chuuya’s mouth flutters open and closed again, eyes narrowing as he takes in the ashen pallor of his skin, something that didn’t use to be there, the stubble that he didn’t bother to shave, a shadow around his eye that probably was a swollen bruise just recently. He looks nothing like the guy that insisted Chuuya was just a naïve little fool getting used by Dazai for profit. He looks even less like the guy that Chuuya once used to kiss at night, and grin at in the mornings. But that person has been gone for a while now.

Shaking his head, he gives Luca a yank. “Yeah, you were, but this is not the fucking time for this discussion. *Let’s go.”*

“You should kill me.”

Chuuya blinks furiously. “The hell I should.” And because this is not the time and place, he simply turns and drags Luca towards the truck.

“You fucked up, big time, but –” his teeth grit as he shoves this stupid, ignorant piece of shit inside, “— so did I. So does everyone. The difference is that I won’t leave you behind because of it.”

He probably should.

Dazai suggested as much.

But Chuuya will be damned if he ruins his one final chance at making some kind of peace with his *family* by killing someone. Luca is a piece of shit, and they will *never* go back to what they once were, but he can brood over his mistakes *alive*. Death would be too merciful. Too easy.

Luca’s expression crumples ever so slightly, a bewildering mixture of desperate hope and dread flitting through his eyes that Chuuya doesn’t have time to decipher right now.

He slams the door shut and gives the truck a slap to signal his subordinates, the drivers, to go.

Just in time, his earpiece crackles with static before he hears the voice of Giyu, the ability user who can make clones of himself and one of the critical components of this operation: “I’m in.”

Because constant surveillance is probably impossible and too expensive with the number of people working for the Bishop’s Staff, they monitor their members’ locations and status with special chip IDs that they use to clock into work, which is why it’s extremely convenient to have a bunch of clones replace the sheep. It’s not ideal since someone is bound to notice that there are imposters among them, but an hour (tops) is all they need.

Starting now.

“Copy that,” he replies and leaps back into the air, switching to the channel that connects him to Miura, in charge of overseeing the location of the sheep that are still currently at work. According to Shirase their locations and tasks often change which is why it was impossible to determine where to pick them off in advance. Luckily, the sheep have always been a creative bunch when it comes to things like these. “Miura-kun, come in.”

“I’m here, sir, and I have got you… pinned down as well,” comes her voice from the other side. “You’ll want to head north from now on. Most of the subjects are there.”

“How far away?”

“2,1 kilometers, sir.”

“You don’t have to call me sir every time.”

“Negative… sir.”

Chuuya scoffs loudly, though the wind that rushes past him swallows it up as he goes.

Miura navigates him to a destination where three of the sheep members are currently stationed at. It’s a two-story-high warehouse building, storing plane cargo according to state documents. Chuuya doubts that is what they are actually doing there if Shirase’s reports are anything to go by.

He positions himself on top of another warehouse nearby. His goal is to remain undetected for as long as possible, but also to take care of any unwanted eyes watching the sheep. Sort of like a guardian angel if you will… though Chuuya immediately regrets thinking that corny thought.

The earlier reaction of the sheep is to blame. Of all the welcomes he expected, hugs and “we knew you’d come”s were *not* on that list. And as much as it hurts to see them act like all of it was just a minor disagreement, it also makes Chuuya realize that maybe they were acting out of fear. Not necessarily fear caused *by him,* but fear for themselves. The sheep, at their core, have always been survivors. Seeing Chuuya drift away and team up with the leader of a criminal organization such as the port mafia probably raised a hundred red flags in them.

It makes sense.

It still stings, but Chuuya understands. He does.

“What if they don’t get out on time, sir?” Miura asks after twenty minutes pass. “We’re talking about people here that crucify their enemies. I doubt they care about worker rights.”

“Our intel says they were usually released on time. Patience.”

On the other end of the line, Miura grunts something indecipherable. “But what if today is different? What if they discover that it’s clones?”

This time it's Chuuya's turn to grunt. The thought of his friends being in danger doesn't sit easily inside his chest. "Then I'll go in myself and bring down the whole building." The port mafia might as well make three out of two attacks.

But he won't have to.

Down on the ground, three figures walk out of the building. Touya. Rin. *Shirase.*

"I've got eyes on all three of them," he murmurs into his earpiece.

" *Thank god.* Their pick-up is waiting for them at, uh… the end of the main road."

Chuuya hums, keeping his eyes trained on the sheep's surroundings as he follows them from the rooftops. At one point, Shirase's gaze wanders to him, though he does a good job of acting nonchalant while simultaneously keeping their pace brisk.

Over the line, Handa announces that the first team with Shiro and co. is already taking off, while four of the other mission members check in to say that the other sheep have been safely picked off.

This, too, goes remarkably smoothly… at least until Shirase and the other two reach the main road only to be stopped by an older man with long, silver hair and black robes.

Chuuya pauses. Waiting to see if something needs to be done.

That answer comes to him when Shirase turns around and stealthily forms a gun with his fingers. A signal that they used in the sheep to communicate.

Without another beat, Chuuya launches himself off the rooftop like a human bullet and at the man, disabling him unconscious without him even realizing what happened. Next to the curb, the port mafia's truck's doors spring open, revealing Yuan behind the driver's seat, urging the sheep to climb inside.

"Was he onto you?" Chuuya breathes out as he swings the large man over his shoulder.

Shirase shakes his head. "Nah, but he was important, I think. You want hostages, right?"

“Right,” he quickly agrees. “Good thinking.”

Shirase nods, looks like he wants to say something else but gets interrupted by Yuan’s command to get the fuck in already.

Chuuya packs the man into the trunk and makes sure he will be out for at least a few hours. When he catches his friends looking at him from the inside he presses out an awkward smile. “See you in ten minutes.”

The sky has been consistently darkening for a while now until a steady rain starts falling from the sky. Chuuya swallows the urge to take it as an ominous sign. His ability saves him from getting drenched as he sprints over the rooftops after Yuan and the sheep, but the cold that the weather brings has a mean bite, making it an unpleasant affair either way.

Giyu’s crackling voice comes shortly before they reach the chopper: “All right, the secret’s out, team. Requesting permission to attack!”

Chuuya swallows. It’s a few minutes ahead of their timetable, but it was clear from the start that they wouldn’t be able to follow it to the tick.

Move as fluidly as water, Dazai told him because that’s how the Bishop Staff operates. They know as much from the previous encounter and from the little sheep intel that they got. What they don’t know is how. Whether it’s some kind of weird hivemind ability, crazy communication skills, or something else entirely.

After today they should.

“Colonel… sir?” Chuuya makes himself say for the sake of seeing this mission through successfully.

“We are in position,” is the sturdy reply. “Fire at will, Giyu-kun.”

While Chuuya was busy escorting the sheep to the choppers, the Colonel and his team identified the best base to attack for now with the help of Giyu. Chuuya doesn’t know the specifics since it’s been running on another channel the entire time but now he hears the sound of the first shot being fired.

A part of him wishes he was there to witness it. See the same people that play gods and mercilessly kill people for being different get obliterated by the same people they hate so much.

Another part of him knows that it's not his time yet. He will get to play soon enough, but first, he has to make sure that his friends are out of harm's way.

That's the most important thing right now, and the moment the Bishop Staff realizes they have been betrayed, they will come after him. If they haven't realized it already, that is.

Because so far it's been a hell of a smooth ride.

Something is coming. Chuuya can *taste* it.

He lands in the sinking mud of the field just as the last sheep member, Mimi, climbs into the chopper. Her steps falter when she sees him though, eyes growing wide and glassy.

"Hi."

Chuuya's lips press together, suppressing a shaky smile of his own. "Hey."

"Everyone's accounted for?" their pilot, one of the Colonel's subordinates, speaks into the headset that Karma hands him as soon as he is inside, accompanied by the sound of choppy blades spinning above them.

Chuuya's eyes roam over the people in the seats, comparing the faces here to the names that are supposed to be present as well. Only then, he replies. "Yeah, get us into the air." He slides the doors shut with a final slam. "They've started the attack. I'm sure they'll be coming for us any minute now."

The engine whines dramatically as they take off, and Chuuya's stomach drops as he positions himself at the side door to man the weapons. It's not the take-off that makes him sweat, not the adrenaline from the mission either. Instead, it's…

This.

Being face to face with the people who left not too long ago, because this time there is nothing more to do, and nowhere to rush off to.

It's Shirase who breaks the tension inside the chopper.

"Dude. My heart's beating like *crazy.*"

Of course it is.

It coaxes out a few tentative smiles and laughs. Even Chuuya huffs lightly to himself, though his eyes lower to the ground because he is not sure where to start.

“Thank you, Chuuya,” someone says then, making his gaze snap up again. It’s Mimi. Sweet, wonderful Mimi. “Thank you. Just… thank you.”

He sees a few of the others, Rin, Ayame, Kenny, nod out of the corner of his vision, and it only thickens the slippery knot in his throat.

What is he supposed to do with that?

Say that it’s just what they do even though that’s not entirely true? Not anymore? Shrug it off and play it cool? Or maybe ask them why they didn’t at least *try* to talk to him, to say goodbye, to just give him a fucking heads-up?

In the end, none of it feels right, so he settles on a simple, “You’re welcome.” For now. Maybe they will have time for more later.

Just then, Chuuya’s earpiece crackles. Then he hears Yuan’s familiar voice. “Chuuya? Everything okay?”

“So far, so good,” he replies, yanking himself out of his head and tilting his neck to take a look out of the window to check for any unwanted guests. “What about you?”

Yuan’s a decent driver, but if anyone got wind of her role in this attack, it would get dangerous very quickly.

“Just peachy. I’m on my way back to the base now. Albatross and the other driver are already there.

“Good. Drive safely.”

“Wait.”

“What?”

“Shirase,” she says. “He’s… he’s really grateful for what you did for them, you know?”

“Why are you telling me this?” he grumbles under his breath. “They’re right here.”

“Because I know how you two are. Emotionally constipated idiots that

can't express their feelings even if your lives depend on it."

"I'm tapping out now."

"All right, all right. Talk to you soon."

"You think they'll come for us?"

That's Shirase.

Chuuya nods when he gets to his feet to grab one of the guns that are mounted by the doors. "A special task force is attacking one of their bases as we speak. And I doubt we got away that easy. That's what you said from the very beginning, right?"

"To be fair, I was mostly worried about the different shifts they had us on, but that cloning man of yours took care of that so…" Shirase shrugs as he casts a glance out of the window. "It's not like they can touch us here."

"Can't they?" Chuuya catches his questioning frown. "They might have ability users."

"But –" Shirase makes a face. "Shit. You're right. I thought they just had them to… you know, but they might also have used them to fight for them."

"But you never saw them utilize anyone?" At the risk of sounding condescending, he asks, "Do you have *anything* at all that you couldn't tell us before?"

Shirase lets out a sigh. "The most 'interesting' thing they ever let me do was document the personal information of the ability users that they had."

"Such as…?"

"Name, age, personal belongings, family history, ability –"

Slightly impatient, Chuuya gestures toward him. "And what ability users did they have?!"

"Hm. Let me think."

"Shirase."

"Calm down, I'm thinking!" Catching Chuuya's scowl, he adds, "I

thought the ability users were already dead, okay! What's the point of remembering them if they're dead?! Oh, wait, I've got one! There was someone with the skill to control electricity. Something like that. Her name was Venki? Venka? Not sure anymore."

"Okay. What else? Anything that could be used to attack us here? Follow us? See through the plan?"

"Uh… a possession ability!"

Chuuya's eyes widen grimly. "Possession *how?"* Because if only one of them is somehow possessed and delivers their location to the Bishop Staff then –

"Possession by some kind of Yokai… that falls from the sky? I don't know, dude. It was weird."

"Okay," Chuuya says slowly before shooting a look into the round. "Anyone here possessed by a Yokai?"

Nope.

"I can tell you all about how they find and recruit people," Rin offers dryly. "But I didn't do much more than that."

Kagura nods. "Me too."

Chuuya lets out a breath, his frown relaxing. "That will be useful too." Just not now.

"I had to work in a factory *making coins,"* Ayame grumbles.

"Coins?" Chuuya echoes. "The hell they're making coins for?"

"Don't ask me. I don't think anyone working there had any idea either. Most of those workers were like us."

"You mean, forced to be there?"

He nods. "I think so. It's like a cult. Once you say yes to them, it's almost impossible to get out."

"Not *like* a cult," Mimi mutters, shaking her head. "I'm pretty sure it *is* one."

A few more nod in agreement.

Rin lets out a huff. “And we just walked right into it. I can’t believe how stupid we were. *Never* trust the religious freaks.”

The silence that descends over them is charged with tension because there it is. The big, fat elephant in the room.

Chuuya feels some of their gazes glance in his direction but doesn’t take his eyes off the window.

“Hey,” Shirase’s voice says then, “De Luca said it was safe and we just wanted out… was that so wrong?”

This time Chuuya lifts his gaze to him, eyes narrowing into a cold glare. “You didn’t even consider that Luca might be *wrong*? That he’s not some kind of all-knowing god who knows what to do best? That making a deal with assholes who *crucify people like me –”* His voice cracks. He has to suck in a breath to go on. “— is a shit idea?”

Shirase looks away. “He offered us a way out, an actual one, and we took it. We didn’t even know that the deal he made involved us joining *them*. We didn’t know who they were until it was already happening.”

“I think De Luca didn’t know either,” Kagura offers. “He thought all we had to do was give them some information. A few names. Places. Things like that, you know? No one expected them to separate us and use us as hostages to stay in line.”

“I understand that they might have surprised you with their… policies, but come on. You didn’t even bother to *ask* where you were going and with whom when you left?” And then: “Were you that desperate to run away from me as quick as possible?”

As soon as the words are out, he wants to take them back. Not because they are not true, because they are, but because they make him sound pathetic.

And Chuuya was supposed to use this chance to get closure, not fight with his friends and demand useless explanations that he already knows the answers to anyway.

“Dude, come on,” Shirase says. “It wasn’t like that.”

Chuuya’s brows jump together. “What do you mean it wasn’t like that? Yuan told me how it went. You wanted to get away from me, or did you not? Because I was some kind of traitor in everyone’s eyes?”

“It wasn’t as simple as that,” Mimi says.

“Then explain it to me.”

The silence that follows says as much though.

“It’s not like you didn’t know that we wanted to leave. But you –” Shirase gestures vaguely towards him.

Chuuya’s brows lift. He *what?*

“I don’t think anyone believed that you would betray the sheep,” Kagura finishes. “I know I didn’t. But you weren’t there. You were never there anymore. What were we supposed to do? Twiddle our thumbs for another month? Wait for the port mafia to get bored of us eventually?” She sighs and adds more quietly, “It was clear that they only wanted you. They didn’t care about us. No one knew when the next chance to leave would come along, or *if* there would be another one at all. Can you really blame us for leaving?”

Rin nods. “We thought it would be safer if you didn’t know anything about it. Not for us, but for *you.”*

Chuuya blinks.

Safer for… him?

Then he half-turns to Shirase. “So you didn’t think I was some kind of monster because of… what happened in Osaka?”

“Dude, don’t get me wrong. You had me worried there for a second. And then you kind of just, y’know…” He shrugs. “… ignored us for the rest of the flight. But it was De Luca who took it personally. I assumed you just had a rough day…? Didn’t we all?”

“That’s one way of putting it,” Chuuya dryly mumbles before glancing at his other friends, their faces a tentative mixture between hope and frustration, just like the beating heart in his chest.

“I’m sorry for not being there,” he finally says because in the end, before they ever abandoned him… he abandoned them. It’s not as black and white as pointing a finger at someone and blaming them for everything that happened, way more nuanced than that, but it has to be said anyway. “I thought I knew what I was doing.” He presses out a bitter half-smile. “I didn’t. Not really.”

Mimi rises to her feet then, swaying a little when the wind pushes against the chopper but catching herself just as easily. Chuuya's not sure what she is doing until she is wrapping her arms around his neck and pulling him into a hug. His whole body tenses, not sure what to do or say or think.

"We're sorry, too," she whispers. "Thank you for coming."

And…

Chuuya's chest sags against her, melting into the embrace like ice under the summer sunshine.

The chopper rumbles again.

Unfolding himself, Chuuya clears his throat and blinks the burning sting in his eyes away.

"Not to ruin this moment, but what exactly does this mean for us?" Shirase pipes up behind him. "Are you back with us or nah?"

At the same time, static crackles in Chuuya's ear. "Team fox has just touched ground. I repeat team fox has just touched ground."

"Team dusk is still five minutes away. We ran into some trouble."

"Team dragonfly will be landing shortly." *Their* team.

"We'll talk later," Chuuya says, grabbing bulletproof vests and pressing one pair into Mimi's hands, then doing the same with the others. "It's possible that we'll be facing an attack now. Keep your heads low, shield your face, and just get as quickly inside the building as possible. You'll be safe there."

"You really think it's possible they followed us here without us knowing?" Rin wonders aloud in the turmoil of getting dressed and ready.

"It's possible. Dazai –" He wavers. "The boss concluded that our arrival will be the most likely phase of this whole extraction mission to get attacked. It's… statistics. Don't ask me."

Two minutes later, Chuuya sees the top of their landing site. One of the port mafia buildings nearby the base. Ten stories high, not as attention-grabbing as the other towers, but high enough.

"Everyone ready?" he asks, seeking out the gazes of his friends, and

Karma until he gets a nod from everyone.

As soon as the chopper touches ground, Chuuya slides open the door and jumps out, taking in the other group of the sheep that's already there, before he gives his friends the signal to follow him.

"We've got eyes on you," Shiraki tells him over the radio. Chuuya only nods, not having to search the top of the buildings surrounding them to know that his subordinates are there.

"Good. The coast is clear?"

"As far as we can see, yes."

Which means that there could be something that they can't see. An ability user with the gift of invisibility perhaps, or someone who can climb walls. Anything.

As he ushers his friends towards the exit, the third and final chopper lands on the rooftop, the power of its blades mixing with the stubborn wind pushing north. Chuuya's heart tries to match the turbulent pace but he keeps it steady by repeating the breathing exercises Dazai practiced with him over the last week. They were pretty annoying then, but maybe not so bad in hindsight.

Making sure all of his friends from the other chopper, Shiro, Misao, god even Luca are safe as well, he keeps a steady shield of gravity around him the entire time while listening to the chatter over his earpiece. All of it just informative, but nothing pressing, nothing dangerous, nothing –

"Nakahara-san, behind you! Watch out!"

And all hell breaks loose.

Just as predicted.

Chuuya feints to the side at the same time as a fist comes swinging at him, accompanied by the raining echo of gunfire all around him. He uses the momentum to spin on one foot and bring the other up while channeling gravity into the ground underneath him –

Except the only thing he touches is air.

Whoever the fist belongs to is already gone.

"Shit," he hears over the radio. "That girl just appeared and

disappeared out of nowhere."

"Looks like a teleportation ability from here, Nakahara-san."

"Get ready anyway," he barks out, *for the tainted sorrow* already bleeding out of him to disable the robed and armed enemy soldiers that he can make out in the whirlwind of chaos that has erupted.

So a teleportation ability.

That's their play then.

"Go to hell!" someone from the sheep – Rin — yells accompanied by the sound of rapid-fire shots. "And fuck your Jesus! Jesus wouldn't stand for this!"

"Get out of here!" Chuuya yells, grabbing the trigger-happy girl to push her towards Shirase who is crowding everyone to the exit. "Shirase, get them all out of here! I'll take care of –"

"Watch out!"

Chuuya increases his weight, expecting—hoping for the teleportation user to be as foolish as to touch him but instead he feels a knife bounce off him. The only thing he catches off the ability user is the fading white glow of her skill.

Gritting his teeth, he whirls back to Shirase, but his friend speaks first. "Go." He gives Chuuya a firm nod. "I've got this."

And that's enough for him to nod back and turn his attention to catching the bastard that thinks she is quick enough not to get touched by gravity.

He taps his earpiece. "Next time you see her, activate it."

"Ready to go, sir."

Chuuya scans the rooftop: one chopper is still here, most of the sheep are being ushered down, Yuan already ready to receive them, and the armed soldiers are –

He taps the ground until they fall down to it with low groans.

— disabled.

The only thing left is…

“Looking for me?” a husky voice behind him says.

Above them, the air crackles with static.

The corner of Chuuya’s mouth tips into a half-smile. “Been waiting, actually.” As soon as he turns, she disappears into thin air, but this time, he sees the white flash of her ability bounce through the air, trying and failing to break through the four invisible walls around them.

A force field.

Something Chuuya and his team prepared just for this.

He catches a flicker of Karma’s excited grin, mirroring his own before he kicks off the pavement and uses the force field to fling himself after the ability user. Even though she has the advantage of jumping through the air, there are only so many places she can go without touching the ground. A few seconds later, she is crashing right into Chuuya’s arms and is quickly pinned to the ground where not even her ability will help her get away from the mean grip that gravity has on her.

“What did they do to you to turn you against your own kind?” he wants to know. “Threaten your friends? Family? Torture to you?”

“You really want to know?” she hisses with a tight-lipped curl of her lips.

“Yes. I can *help* .”

Her dark eyes slide past him, and she jerks her chin. “Then turn around.”

A piece of Chuuya stills hearing these words. Pure, unadulterated terror crawling out of the bottom of his stomach and into his veins. He still makes himself turn around.

The sight makes him gulp down a dry lungful of air.

“Luca?” he utters slowly. “What are you doing?”

Luca, who has one arm wound around Karma’s neck and the other one holding a gun that is pressing against Karma’s temple, takes a shallow breath and shakes his head rapidly. “I told you to kill me. I told you, damn it, didn’t I?” His voice is strikingly hollow compared to the

things he is saying.

“Luca,” Chuuya says, slowly rising to his feet, “whatever you –”

Instantly the barrel of the gun presses closer against Karma’s skull, eliciting a shocked hitch of breath. “*Don’t* move!”

Pausing, he lifts his hands into the air. “I’m not moving.”

“Good.” Luca nods a few times. “Good. If you listen to what I tell you to do, no one will get hurt.” An awful parody of a laugh punctuates his declaration. “Well, except… The *sheep* won’t get hurt. They don’t care about them.”

“Luca –”

“No, *don’t* talk. I gave you a chance to kill me, now it’s too late, Chuuya.” His chin jerks past him. “She has a pair of handcuffs inside her jacket. Grab them. Then release her, and put them on yourself.”

Chuuya’s lashes flutter. “You… want me to turn myself over?”

“*They* want that,” Luca snaps, his tone trembling as much as his hands do. “Do it before I have to blow this kid’s brains out. *Please.”*

Chuuya takes a careful glance over his shoulder and is met with the ability user’s sardonic smile. “Still think you can *help* me, boy?”

His gaze slides back to Luca, weighing his options. He can be fast. Inhumanly fast. But can he be fast enough to stop a bullet from penetrating Karma’s skull if Luca pulls the trigger? (And he *will* pull the trigger. Whatever–or, whoever has prompted this betrayal must be even worse than the promise of death.)

Karma meets Chuuya’s eyes, wordlessly shaking his head and telling him not to do it.

“Nakahara-san,” comes a distressed voice from the radio. Shiraki. “The boss says do *not* under any circumstances turn yourself over. We will take care of this.”

“No,” Chuuya whispers, “don’t –”

“Watch out!” the ability user behind him yells.

The thin, red glow of a sniper gun aims at the back of Luca’s head. Chuuya sees him make the decision in his eyes before his fingers pull

the trigger, so he lets *for the tainted sorrow* run free, bleed into the pavement, and infect him but –

Turns out he isn't faster than a bullet.

Karma is still looking at him when the bullet makes his head explode, showering both him and Luca in blood before they both get dragged down by gravity.

Chuuya just stands there, rooted to the ground, watching the pavement under his feet give away in slow-motion.

I hate it.

I hate it ***so much.***

So. Much.

The air trembles as the atmosphere around him starts to burst. Invisible electrical discharges that cause red and black sparks to shower near his eyes.

A wind forms inside him, coming from a place so deep and rotten, his own personal watering hole, that it shreds his gloves into pieces, sets his now-bare arms on fire, and causes the rooftop, the surrounding buildings, the very earth itself to creak and shake.

And all Chuuya can do is *stare*. At Karma's bloody corpse lying on the ground, eyes hollow. Lifeless. At Luca, face twisted into a wide-eyed wince as he tries to keep himself standing despite the gusts of air storming against him.

I hate it.

"I… I hate it too," Chuuya whispers and his voice turns into a scream, a sound devoid of anything human before he unscrews the lid of the snarling beast that has been slumbering inside him and surrenders himself to his rage, painting the world *black*.

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A second later a shock wave blasts against the windows of Dazai's office and everything else in its surroundings. The only reason the glass doesn't shatter is that the building has been fortified to withstand an attack of this exact caliber. It doesn't stop the impact though: a deep, unearthly rumbling that makes the entire floor shake

like the earth is cracking into several pieces.

“What just happened?” Albatross exclaims, heaving himself up from the floor as several people rush to Dazai. “Are we under attack?”

Gin stares outside. “That… that looked like a bomb to me.”

“Felt like an earthquake,” the head of his security team mutters. “Did anyone else think it was an earthquake?”

Dazai dusts himself off after shooing his subordinates away, his gaze locked on the burning building outside the window. He has had a feeling he would witness this sooner or later but actually seeing it –

The sheer destruction that one single man can cause…

It is as terrifying as it is fascinating.

“Deploy as many rescue teams as we have available,” he finally starts firing off orders. “Rescue whomever you can from the building. This isn’t an attack.” Then his gaze slides to Albatross. “Fly me over there.”

His left hand’s man eyes widen at the same time as the room explodes into a chorus of protests.

“Boss, with all due respect, but going to the site of the explosion is not a smart choice! If anything, you should be taken to the bunker right now!”

“I strongly advise you against such rash actions, boss!”

“We do not know what’s out there, boss! Please rethink!”

Thankfully they all fall silent as soon as Dazai lifts his hand, his visible eye leaving no room for any objections. “You’ve all been given a job. Do it. *Now.”* Once his people get moving, albeit begrudgingly, Dazai looks at Albatross again, waving him over. “We don’t have much time. Let’s go.”

Albatross knows better than to tell him no, but his anxiety radiates off him like an infectious disease as they stride out of the door. The three loyal guardsmen outside only need to see him nod to follow him.

“Boss,” Albatross leans into him, “what the hell is going on?” And when Dazai doesn’t answer, he frantically whispers, “Yuan was in that building. Our people were!”

His mouth clamps shut at the stare Dazai slides him. “You only have one job right now, Albatross,” Dazai says once they reach the door leading to the roof on the top of the staircase. “And that is to get me to the site of the explosion. I suggest you focus on that if you want Yuan or anyone else to make it out in one piece.”

Albatross nod, even if he doesn’t look too happy about it before he jogs over the chopper waiting for them there. Dazai sits down in the bucket seat when the blades already start spinning, the engine waking up with an escalating whine.

“Your executives will kill me if I bring you back dead,” Albatross mutters, his voice tinny over the headset as they take off. “Who’s the second in command? Kouyou?”

She used to be.

But because the actual second in command is currently being possessed by a soulless calamity, Dazai nods.

Albatross groans. “She’ll cut me into pieces!”

Dazai’s eye slides to the world below them and stays glued to it. Where Chuuya must be standing in the center, the scenery begins to disappear–like the colors have melted and are being sucked into him.

And after that, only a black sphere is left.

The space trembles.

The side of another eight-story building that has been near the sphere has completely disappeared. The steel frames, the concrete walls, the floors, the ceilings, the decorations. Everything.

Not destroyed. Not melted. It just *disappeared*.

And it’s not limited to the building only.

The melted street lamps, the parked cars, the birds and insects nearby that didn’t manage to escape fast away, the pulverized ground, the cars and utility poles, and fire hydrants, all of it gets sucked into the hole and vanished.

Only for the sphere to expand.

“Boss,” he hears Albatross mutter next to him, “are you *really* sure you want me to take you there *?”*

As if on cue, a black sphere pops up right in front of them. So close that Dazai can practically *taste* what it's like being swallowed by that thing. By a black hole. Because that's what it is. What Chuuya, in this form, does. A disaster in space itself, more terrifying than any explosion or chemical reaction.

"Holy – *hang on tight!"*

The chopper makes a sharp 180-degree turn, barely avoiding an endless journey into the unknown, only for a dozen alarms to start blaring through the cockpit.

"Shit, shit, shit!" Albatross curses. "Boss, we'll either get sucked in by one of those things, we somehow manage to get through and fry our systems only for you to melt to death down there! Either way, we all die!"

"You're the best pilot this country has," Dazai tells him without taking his eyes off the devastation below. "You'll get it done." There are particles of ash floating in the air from the shock wave. Sirens wailing all over the city. People running through the streets. The port mafia evacuated most of the surrounding buildings before the mission, but it's still the biggest attack that Yokohama has seen since the war. This is bound to become a political and military mess.

They get close enough to get a good look at the epicenter of it all.

The building looks like a baby comet crashed into it, and in the middle of that crater is Chuuya. His figure is tiny from up here, but Dazai can see the way he is bent over and collapsed.

"How much longer?" Dazai asks. They're running out of time.

"I – I don't know where to land, boss! There is nowhere to land!"

"Take me close enough so I can jump."

"You'll die!"

"If I don't, then the entire city – no, the entire *continent* will end up in one of those holes," Dazai snaps back. "Do you want to risk that?"

Albatross grits his teeth in reply. "I should have just let those soldiers shoot me ten years ago FUCK, OKAY! I'LL GET YOU THERE, BOSS!"

Dazai smiles before getting to his feet. "I'll need you to take us back as

soon as this mini apocalypse is over. I have a feeling our enemies are already circling."

Next, he looks at his bodyguards. "Keep an eye out on the surroundings. *Don't* shoot or aim at the man in the center of it all. Got it?"

Three firm nods.

Dazai slides the door open and is met with boiling wind, the air surrounding the building quivering with heat. It makes his skin prickle, but there is no other way to go now but right into the middle of it all.

"I'll get as close as I can without letting us get sucked into one of those things! Jump as soon as you think it's doable!"

"Copy that," he murmurs, watching the center of the crater get close and closer. His coat flutters behind him, trying to escape an imminent death by melting. Dazai waits until the distance between them and what used to be a rooftop gets short enough to survive a fall. Then he draws the hood of his coat over his head, signals his bodyguards to be on standby, and takes the leap.

He feels a fleeting flash of gratefulness for his old man who moved heaven and earth to expand the limits of his human body. The lessons prove to be useful when he manages to land on both of his feet and one hand in Chuuya's kingdom of rubble and ash.

In front of him, the space trembles and convulses, spits out a piece of the surrounding earth, then stops again. Chuuya's body, bent over on all fours, shakes with the violent tremors that run through him, so he– the thing possessing him—doesn't recognize that he isn't alone anymore right away.

Dazai takes a step closer. Then another. The stormy wind rips his hood off. Then the bandages around his eyes, fluttering in the air before flying away completely. And another step. Until the heat pouring off Chuuya threatens to swallow Dazai whole.

It's only then that the godly creature slowly turns. His eyes white and soulless. The skin under his torn clothes marred with glowing crimson-red symbols. Blood pouring out his nose. Mouth. Ears. Painting him in thorns.

And yet, when their eyes meet, Dazai feels seen. Around them, the

world wails in agony and chaos, sirens blaring in the distance, helicopters circling ahead, buildings in the vicinity fighting a hopeless battle against the gravity of black holes, but for just a moment, time flatlines.

Transfixed, he stares at Chuuya in his most powerful and most devastating form. A study in perfect annihilation. A mirror. A compass. A –

Whimper.

A broken whimper fights its way out of his bloody mouth, pleading for an end to the pain that he must be in right now.

Reality crashes back into Dazai, submerging him in a boiling whirlpool of heat and volume and the thick stench of death in the air. The space next to Chuuya distorts again, quivering –

And Dazai crosses the distance between them in three strides, his hands landing on Chuuya's blazing cheeks before another black hole can tear the world apart.

The abnormal gravitational field surrounding them instantly vanishes. Chuuya staggers forward, collapsing into his chest. Dazai keeps one arm around his back as he lowers both of them gently to the ground while cupping Chuuya's head with the other hand.

The choppy sounds of an army of helicopters approaching get closer and closer.

Dazai's eyes scan the damage to their surroundings. There are no longer black holes, but the building is still slowly collapsing in on itself. Then they slide to the unconscious body in his lap. "I'm sorry, Chuuya," he murmurs, fingers driving through the ashen strands of his hair. "I really am."

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The hospital room feels like a morgue. Deathly silent. The man lying on the bed isn't dead, though. Even if the ashen pallor of his skin makes him look like it.

Chuuya hasn't woken up since the incident which transpired 30 hours ago.

A lot has happened in that time.

Which is why Dazai can't seem to get a single moment of peace. Even here.

"Tell me," he diligently says to the little shadow that sneaked into the room. Gin is not responsible for any of the mess that happened.

Clutching a tablet to their chest, they enter his field of vision. Their eyes flit to Chuuya before refocusing on Dazai. "There have been five new news reports with… the footage, Boss. I gave our communication team the same order on your behalf. And the Colonel has repeatedly called for a meeting of all executives."

"Tell him he'll get his meeting when all five executives are awake to join."

Gin cringes. "The Colonel explicitly stated that he doesn't want executive Chuuya to be part of it since it's about… what happened… boss."

Dazai only has to slide a wordless look their way to get his message across.

Gin nods, and clears their throat. "I'll remind him of his rank, boss." Then they pause, glancing at the bed again. "Is he going to be alright?"

"He'll be fine," Dazai murmurs. Physically, at least. Doc said that the internal injuries, that caused him to bleed, are already regenerating with the help of Chuuya's ability. He will most likely be weak and exhausted for another few days once he wakes up as his body recovers from the trauma it went through, but otherwise fine.

Whether the same can be said about his psyche is questionable.

Experiencing what that thing inside him can do is one thing, but hearing what exactly it *caused?*

Dazai stretches out his arm to touch Chuuya's hand. It's shockingly cold compared to the heat that was pumping through him when he sagged against Dazai on that rooftop.

"He'll wake up soon."

Gin's lips press together. They nod. "I have no doubt about that. He is strong."

There is an uncertain question mark lingering at the end of that sentence. An unspoken *how strong exactly? Who is he?* What *is he? What can he do?* The same questions that his people have been firing at him for the last day and a half, and the reason he sought out this place of quietude.

“I’ll go now, boss,” they finally say, giving him a brief bow before slipping out of the room as silently as they entered.

Sighing, Dazai rubs his thumb over Chuuya’s fingers, hoping that the shy spark of warmth will break through his deep slumber and get him back here. It will hurt him. It might even break him in half. But the sooner he hears, the better. The longer it takes him to wake up… the uglier the scar.

He doesn’t wake right away.

Minutes, one hour, two, two and a half pass before Chuuya stirs, his head lolling to the side and lashes fluttering weakly until eventually his eyes open.

Dazai, who hasn’t stopped holding his hand, squeezes it gently. He doesn’t smile, doesn’t say anything, doesn’t let him think that what happened was just a horrible nightmare even if just for another moment. That would just hurt more.

Chuuya scans the room, then finds Dazai and stares at him for a long moment. Eventually, he whispers, “What did I do?”

And even though Dazai has been preparing his speech for the last 33 hours now, he still finds himself freezing.

Chuuya’s eyes harden. “Say it,” he demands quietly.

Dazai nods. Takes a breath. “After De Luca shot Karma, something inside you awoke and caused a blast of pure destruction. It destroyed half of the building that you were on. You also created black holes that essentially swallowed everything in the vicinity. It made an eight-story building nearby and a few other shops disappear. The same black holes cause intense heat which led the building to collapse in the end.” Chuuya’s stubborn gaze begins to crumple slowly as Dazai continues. “We’ve sent out rescue teams to get the people inside out as soon as it started, but there wasn’t anything we could do anymore. So far we’ve recovered 23 bodies of the –” chin trembling, Chuuya silently shakes his head “— sheep. We are still digging through the rubble but because of the black holes, it’s possible that we’re not going

to find more either. As of now 21 of your friends died yesterday, Chuuya. I am sorry."

"No," Chuuya whispers, pleads, begs, scrambling to sit up. "No, that's not – that can't be. It's not possible."

Dazai watches him stagger out of bed, still frantically shaking his head, only to stumble to his knees and hands three steps in. Still too weak. *"No.* I couldn't…" He turns his head to Dazai, pupils shrunk to two tiny black holes. "Could I?"

"You could," Dazai tells him honestly, holding his gaze, "and you did."

Chuuya's shoulders curl forward, chest caving in when a whimper breaks out of his mouth. Then another. And another. And he presses a fist against his mouth as his entire body starts shaking with the force of the tears that come and come and come as endless as the ocean.

Dazai rises to his feet only to follow Chuuya to the floor, sinking down on his knees next to him and placing around his curled fist digging a hole into the ground. Chuuya slumps even more, breaths coming out ragged and shallow.

"Come here," Dazai says.

Chuuya shakes his head, trying to get away from him but right now he is outmatched. Right now his body is weakened enough to let Dazai drag him into his arms and cup the back of his head with one hand.

"You will feel like it will shred your soul into a billion tiny pieces," Dazai murmurs against his hair as Chuuya presses his uncontrollable sobs into his shoulder. "Like you will never be able to breathe properly again. But you will."

Chuuya's lungs hiccup against him.

"You will."

Dazai did. Had to.

Every. Single. Time.

Chapter End Notes

I will NOT be paying for your therapy, but you can still pretend like the comment section is a therapist's office >:)

Next chapter, we have:
- one final lamb
- a breakdown
- and a vow

Chapter 27: Long Into an Abyss

Chapter Notes

> Hey, hey, it's been a while as I've been busy with exams, but I'm back with a new chapter!
>
> Warnings: explicit gore somewhere in the middle of the chapter, suicidal ideation, and just... a lot of grief and mourning. I'm sure you guys know what I mean after the last chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“We're live here with News Seven: Authorities in Yokohama are still searching for the suspect who is believed to be responsible for the recent explosion in the Nishi ward. The blast occurred around 6:14 p.m. and caused the collapse of a five-story building which had been home to a language school, three restaurants, a discounter, and a hair salon. At the same time as the explosion, three other buildings mysteriously disappeared, also believed to be the fault of the suspect.

"The Nishi ward chief inspector stated that live video footage from the scene indicated that the suspect was a tall male in his early twenties with dark, short, curly hair and formal work attire.

“According to the chief inspector, the explosion may have been a result of a domestic terrorist attack, and the suspect may pose a serious threat. If you have any information regarding the incident or have previously been in contact with the suspect, please contact the hotline listed below."

***

Being the boss of the port mafia means that Dazai not only has to keep the various types of businesses that they run in check but his subordinates, too. It means reinforcing their code of loyalty by any means necessary – which sometimes includes interfering with their relationships. Never explicitly, of course. An unfounded rumor here, a fabricated police report there. After all, the devil is always in the details.

That is why, after reporting to Dazai that Kouyou Ozaki was socially seeing the armed detective’s agency doctor, Piano Man’s first question was: “What do you want me to do about it?”

Should he remind Kouyou of what happened the last time she let someone into her heart? Should he have the authorities arrest the doctor for her inhuman service during the war? Or should he put the target of a foreign organization on her back, let someone else do the dirty work, and watch Kouyou sink deeper into the bottomless ocean that goes by the name port mafia?

What should he do to put an end to such a blasphemous relationship to prevent it from planting dangerous seeds of light and disloyalty in their top executive's head?

That is also why he didn't understand when Dazai's only command was to do nothing for the time being. Let them see each other. Let the seeds grow into thorns.

Dazai is confident that Piano Man understands now:

"We had to give her a sedative, so she will be out cold for a while. Poor girl wouldn't stop screaming. But otherwise, she'll make a full recovery." Dr. Yosano Akiko's mouth twists into a sad smile as she shakes her head. "Physically, at least."

When no one in the room speaks – not Dazai, not Chuuya, not Kouyou, Albatross steps closer to the bed. "When will she wake up?"

When they found her, most of her limbs were crushed under tons of rubble, her upper body just one giant bruise. Somehow she kept breathing though. For long enough to transport her to the detective agency and let Dr. Yosano Akiko perform her magic on her.

Dr. Yosano Akiko is right.

Yuan will live.

The question is whether she will want to now that most of her friends are gone.

"A few hours, give or take," Yosano answers. "As there's nothing more to do here for me, she's in your care now." Her eyes flicker to Dazai, not for long but not with the weighty respect of his subordinates either. "I advise you to let her rest for another day or two until she calms down."

The IV bag drips and disturbs the raw silence in the room.

Dazai steals a glance in Chuuya's direction. "Do you want to wait?"

“No,” Chuuya says, gaze drifting past Yuan – drifting past everything. “We’re done here.”

The doctor frowns, confused. “Are you sure? She asked for you when she was awake. Several times.”

Ignoring her, Chuuya only looks at Dazai long enough to confirm his decision to leave before he strides out of the room.

“Thank you for the favor,” he tells Yosano and offers her a curt nod. “We will remember it.”

Both Albatross and Kouyou look like they don’t agree with Chuuya’s sudden departure – like they don’t understand, but they know enough to keep their opinions to themselves. So does Dazai. He will not tell Chuuya how to mourn. The only thing he can do is follow Chuuya wherever his grief takes him and befriend whoever emerges from it.

***

“A candidate matching your description has already been identified, boss. Kawaguchi Shig. Twenty-three years old. My team is on its way to retrieve him and prepare the scene as we speak."

Dazai gives Piano Man a nod before sliding his gaze Kouyou’s way.

“We were able to extract a considerable amount of valuable information from the prisoners captured by Colonel-san, and we are prepared to do the same with the sheep boy.“ She pauses. “Should you request it."

Dazai casts a glance towards Chuuya at that, waiting to see if he reacts, but his blank stare suggests that he is absent.

When corruption broke through the force field, the teleportation ability user escaped. Chuuya's captive died in the incident. Only the Colonel's home-brought men remain for interrogations – a number that is far too small. Somehow, most of the valuable assets committed suicide, though Dazai has yet to receive the pathology reports to find out how they accomplished that when the Colonel's troops had been thoroughly briefed on checking their captives' mouths.

And then there was the odd surprise delivered a day ago.

De Luca. Safe and sound despite being the closest to the initial blast.

Dazai's guess is on the teleportation user. The question that remains is why they gave him back. Is it a trojan horse or just a messenger?

"Hold off on the interrogation for now," he tells Kouyou.

She nods. The Colonel bristles.

"How that boy is still alive after twice betraying the port mafia is beyond my comprehension, but you're not even going to try and find out what he knows?!"

"I *said*," Dazai speaks without looking at him, "what I said."

"With all due respect, *boss,"* the Colonel practically grinds out through his teeth, "but I fail to see the logic behind our current actions. We have started a war, but have no useful intelligence whatsoever and are as blind as before because all our prisoners keep dying on us! And the public knows your face and has labeled you a terrorist because *that –"* his hand gestures at Chuuya. "—thing, monster, boy, whatever decided to go off like a nuclear bomb in broad daylight, directing all attention on us. Not only that, but he killed half of my subordinates –"

"Your subordinates died fighting for the port mafia," Dazai cuts in. "They joined for that purpose, and that is what they died for. That's how we will all die."

"You won't address the fact that he caused that explosion? The punishment he deserves for betraying us is an exec—"

"*He* has a name and outranks you, Colonel."

The Colonel's reply comes to a sputtering stop before it even gets out. Bewildered, he shakes his head. "Unbelievable." He spits out a curse. "This is unbelievable. *I* led the attacks. *I* razed three of their bases to the ground. *I* was already an executive while you were still in the crib!"

Dazai's mouth sharpens into an amused smile. "And who were you serving then?"

The Colonel curls his hands into fists, but he doesn't reply.

Now that won't do.

"Go on. Say his name, Colonel."

Silence.

“I won’t ask twice.”

A sigh. “Tsushima. Tsushima Gen’emon.”

“And who is his son?”

“You,” he grits out.

Dazai’s heritage was the port mafia’s loudest secret during Mori’s reign. Understandably so. Everyone wanted to know why Dazai stuck so close to the man that had allegedly killed his father, but no one ever dared to ask. Though he supposes they all got their answers once he took over the throne.

“That’s more like it. I might have been in a crib when my father promoted you to an executive but I had still more say in political matters back then than you. Keep that in mind the next time you want to bark like an untrained dog.”

The silence that descends over the room crackles with charge.

Dazai sneaks another hopeless glance to his right but if Chuuya has any opinions about what he just heard, he doesn’t show them, his gaze trained on nothing in particular. At empty air. Dazai wouldn’t be surprised if Chuuya didn’t even register the topic of the conversation.

So he turns back to his executives instead and provocatively raises his brows. “Does anyone else have any incompetent opinions that they want to share with me?” There are no volunteers. Pleased, he nods. “Wonderful. Then you’re excused.” When it takes them a few seconds too long to gather their shit and leave, he flaps his fingers through the air. “You all have orders. Go on now.”

In the flurry of movement, he waves Gin over, who has been keeping notes of the meeting. “Give the Colonel a taste of the grumbler treatment.”

Gin nods wordlessly.

Leading such a big organization as the port mafia means having a strategy to deal with people who are foolish enough to speak against the current. Some of them voicing clever but poorly timed opinions. Others just begging to end up with three shots in their back and their jaw cracked open.

The Colonel is somewhere in-between.

He lost a decent amount of his subordinates, but that is no excuse to act dumb and completely overlook the valuable use of the power that Chuuya holds, let alone suggest an execution.

Only a fool would make a demand this epically blind to Dazai himself.

So Gin, who is not only excellent at handling the obscene amount of paperwork on his desk but also various sharp knives, will show him exactly what his death will look like if he plans to be stupid again.

When the door falls shut and drapes the room in silence, Dazai gets up and walks over to the sole man that has not moved a centimeter since he sat down two hours ago and the endless discussions started. “Chuuya,” he says, squatting down in front of him with a hand on his knee. “Sweetheart. I need you to tell me what to do with De Luca.”

At long last, the ice in Chuuya’s eyes melts enough to give Dazai a glimpse of the person behind it. Their gazes meet. “I want to speak to him.”

“Okay.” Dazai nods and squeezes his knee before rising back to his feet. “I will take you there.”

***

“I’ll be here if you need anything.”

Chuuya nods before the guards heave open the doors to the dungeon. He steps inside, and they fall shut behind him, swallowing all the natural light, and only leaving behind the rusty flicker of the oil lamp that illuminates the way down the tarnished flight of stairs.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

And on the other end of it is De Luca, arms chained to the wall behind him and body bent forward. His eyes only lift for a second before falling to the ground again.

Dazai said that he hasn’t ordered an interrogation yet. Because he wanted Chuuya’s input on it. Because for some reason he cares about that. But even though no questions have been asked of De Lucayet, things have been said. His face is dotted with shadows.

That is how the port mafia deals with traitors. No one…

No one gets away unpunished.

“Why.”

It’s supposed to be a question, but he doesn’t have the energy to raise his voice above the flat, empty tone it’s in right now.

De Lucalets out a slow breath. The chains around his wrists jingle. Yet that is all that Chuuya gets.

His jaw hardens. “Why?” he asks, louder this time. “We were close. We were right there. You were almost free. What did they do to you to make it give all of it up? *What* was it that made you turn?”

“Free?” De Lucashakes his head before raising his gaze to him and revealing the broken shell of the boy that he once used to be. There is nothing in there anymore. No contempt. No anger. No protectiveness. No determination to save Chuuya, save the sheep, or anyone else. Nothing. “We were never going to be free. They knew about the entire plan the minute you contacted the sheep.”

Chuuya’s eyes narrow, searching for the truth. Or the logic. Or… something. Something that will replace that leeching emptiness inside him.

De Lucalets his head fall back against the wall, a sigh leaving his chest. “Even this,” he murmurs. “They knew I would end up here. Talking to you. Or the boss. Or someone else. Even this, Chuuya.”

“What do you mean *even this*?” he growls out. “You were going to capture me and sell me out like an animal to them. How is this supposed to be part of their plan?”

“Capturing you was only a contingency plan. Or maybe this was the contingency plan… I don’t know. I only know the orders they gave me and what was at stake if I didn’t obey. That’s all. That’s all I ever was to them. To you. To my family and –”

“I don’t give a crap about how useless you’ve felt all your life!” Chuuya snaps, slamming his head against the wall so it leaves a dent. De Lucagroans, eyelids fluttering. “You did this! You made a deal with them! You drove the sheep there, and *you –”* His clenched teeth shake with the rage that pours through him, but still, the last accusation crumbles to ashes in his mouth.

Because it's not true.

It wasn't De Lucawho –

Chuuya lets go of him and turns away, pressing his trembling fist against his lips again, until the tremors subside.

"They said that you were the devil's making. That you'll bring ruin onto this world someday."

His eyes slide to De Luca.

"I used to believe I had it all figured out, you know? I thought that ability users were..." he huffs, closing his eyes. "... dangerous if they fall into the wrong hands. It's why I hated the deal with the port mafia. I thought you were just another weapon for them. I thought they – that *he* would exploit you until he had no use for you anymore. All I wanted was to get back to the way we used to be. I wanted us to be the sheep again."

"You were wrong," Chuuya tells him.

"I was. Somehow I turned to the same people that I was trying to protect us from. I thought they'd help us run away but instead, they were the ones to..." His mouth tightens. "They did things. Things that I never wanted to be part of."

He lets out a bitter laugh and scrubs a hand across his face before turning back to De Luca. "You didn't want to do it. Is that why you're saying?" He takes a step closer. "You didn't want to steal a gun, tell me to turn myself over so a bunch of religious madmen can cut me open and kill one of my teammates, a fifteen-year-old boy who spent his entire life living in chains? Well, if you didn't want to do that, why *did you?!"*

"Because they see everything!"

"What does that fucking mean?!"

"They. *See.* Everything." De Luca's eyes squeeze shut. "Not like this." Then they open again. "But like this. They see everything, Chuuya. *He* does. The moment I step out of line, I'm dead, or worse: my family is. My friends are."

Chuuya stares at him.

“Do you understand? They *see.*”

It’s impossible that the port mafia has missed any devices on him when he landed here, which means whatever he is talking about isn’t on him but…

Inside him.

His eyes specifically.

“Why are you telling me this now?”

“Because once I do what they want me to do, they’ll have no use for me anymore. They’ll kill me.”

“How…” Chuuya trails off. The answer is once again obvious. It must be his eyes somehow. After another moment he abruptly turns around. “Can they hear too?”

“No.”

Chuuya digs his nails into his palm. “Then you could have warned the sheep. You could have told them! You could have –”

“The sheep communicated through visuals only because they thought they were being listened in to!”

“And you couldn’t tell them that?!”

“I have a ticking bomb inside my head! One wrong move and I’m dead!”

“Then you should have killed yourself! You should have done something,” he hisses. “You should have cut your eyes out, left the sheep some kind of message, tell them — *anything* except listen to what they tell you to do!”

“If I had killed myself, they would have killed the sheep. My family. Everyone that I care about…” De Luca’s huff echoes through the dungeon. “But I suppose that doesn’t matter now anyway. They’re all… They’re dead, aren’t they?”

The world sways and comes to an abrupt stop.

“I lost consciousness when it started. And when I woke up, I was already here. But they all died, Chuuya. Right?”

Somewhere a lonesome drop of water drips down.

“What was that?” De Luca continues. “What are you?”

No one.

Nothing.

“I felt so guilty for betraying you. For selling you out to them. But maybe they were right. Maybe you will bring ruin onto this world.”

Drip. Drip. Drip.

“You could probably crack the world apart with those powers you’re harboring inside you.”

Chuuya’s eyes flutter closed. He inhales. Exhales. “What’s your last order, De Luca?”

His silence is telling. The fact that he knows it's coming doesn't make him any less scared. That's what the last few minutes and this entire conversation were about. Stalling for time. More time on this wretched planet.

“To deliver a message.”

Chuuya waits.

“Those people have a god, and that god will purge the world of all sinners. You will be freed as well, Chuuya."

“He?” Chuuya replies. "You're going to die soon. Just tell me who he is."

“I’m just the messenger.”

“The mafia will torture you, De Luca. It will take you *weeks* to die. Do you want that?” Chuuya shakes him until those miserable empty eyes return his gaze. “Do you want to be tortured to death? Tell me what you know and you won’t have to. I can help you.”

“Why would you help me after all that I’ve done?”

“Because,” he whispers, heart pumping feverishly, “you’re the last shot I have of saving my fucking soul.”

There are no take-backs. No do-overs. Certainly no miracles. He can’t

undo what he has done, can't scrub the blood off his hands no matter how hard he tries, but he can do this. Spare one *stupid, naïve* life that he used to care about once. Even if it's De Luca's.

De Lucascans the dungeon before beckoning him closer. Chuuya hesitates, a few thousand scenarios of one last betrayal running through his head. Eventually, he leans in though, letting De Luca whisper the words into his ear.

He listens.

He nods.

Then he lowers his hand to De Luca's chest and pushes until he hears a choked whimper. He watches De Luca's body slump forward, only kept upright by the chains around his lifeless wrist.

There is a wet muffled sound when Chuuya withdraws his hand from his chest. Slippery with his blood. It drips down to the floor just like that lonesome drop of water. *Drip. Drip. Drip.*

Chuuya takes a breath. Then another. Just like Dazai always tells him to. Inhale. Exhale. Everything else doesn't matter. You only need to focus on your lungs and the air that flows through them.

With one hand, he grabs De Luca's hair and digs his fingers into his eye socket with the other. Using gravity manipulation, he tears through skin, bones, and blood until he grasps the metal eye, wired to his blood vessels. That triggers some sort of kill switch, an explosive, but that too is quickly contained by gravity. Chuuya lets the blast only be enough to sting. To make sure he can still feel the pain.

He steps back, fingers clasped around the device. De Luca's body sags forward, crimson blood dripping from holes in both his eye socket and chest. To have so much blood in one body...

Chuuya turns on his feet and somehow drags them to the staircase and up the steps. *Inhale. Step. Drip. Exhale. Step. Drip. Inhale. Step. Drip. Exhale. Step. Drip*

He slams his hand against the wall five times. *Knock, knock-knock-knock, knock.*

The doors are dragged open. There is an army of guards waiting for him outside. Dazai's gaze drifts to his face, then to his fist.

“He’s dead,” Chuuya says, and blinks as a dozen guns point at him.

“Stand down,” Dazai hisses, his two cold, calculating eyes (when did he stop covering half of his face?) relaxing only after the guards drop their weapons again. Then they find Chuuya. Silent, but expectant.

He holds out his hand until Dazai gets the message and opens his palm for him. Chuuya presses the device into it. “That’s why all the prisoners keep dying,” he murmurs and lifts his head to look at Dazai. “It was a trap. The entire thing was a trap from the start.”

***

During a conflict with the GSS five or six years ago, Shirase and Yuan were captured and held as hostages in order to force the sheep to give up their territory in Suribachi city. Chuuya thought that the fear he felt in those miserable thirty-one hours was the worst thing in the world. The uncertainty of not knowing if the people he cared about most were alive. If he had failed in his duty to protect them. If life would be the same after all of this.

Then Ace got his hands on him, determined to carve the fight out of him, and Chuuya realized physical agony could be just as painful. The thirst. That feeling of hopelessness. The smell of his burned, rotting flesh, his sweat, his tears, his dried blood.

All of that seemed so trivial compared to the hole in his chest after the sheep left. Being rejected by those he spent his life fighting for. Being abandoned.

But this…

All of it pales in comparison to this.

This emptiness. It's as if he's a gutted fish lying on the shore, waiting for a merciful end only for a wave to keep him alive for an hour more. And another. And another. And so on it goes. No end to this carousel of nothing.

Knock, knock.

“Chuuya?”

And on and on and on –

“Chuuya, you’ve been in there for an hour now. Open up or I’ll come

in."

On and on and on and on and on…

After a few twists, the door knob clicks open.

His eyes are glued to the wall, but he can feel Dazai's presence invade the bathroom like a shadow falling over the earth each evening. He can feel Dazai come closer, his eyes rake over him, the words turn in his head and –

"You smell."

Chuuya blinks.

"You need to take a shower."

His eyes tear away from the bathroom tiles, flitting to Dazai, and freezing when the expression on his face is a cold, hard echo of what Chuuya is used to.

"Get in the shower," Dazai tells him, in a soft voice that leaves no room for objections. "Now, Chuuya."

A cold shiver runs down his spine as he pushes himself off the ground. For the first time in days, something other than suffocating numbness runs through his veins. A spark of adrenaline. A razor-sharp fear of being trapped inside a cage with a snake. Of perhaps having been wrong all this time.

"Good," Dazai murmurs once he is standing, and that elicits neither fear nor numbness, but something warm, something pleasant. Still, Chuuya only watches as he turns on the water in the shower, starting to fill the room with steam and wet heat. Waiting. "Do you want me to leave?"

"No." He doesn't care whether Dazai makes him feel terrified or good. Anything is better than the fog.

Dazai nods, then pushes him towards the sink with a palm on his spine. "Give me your hands. Good. Like that." He starts scrubbing the blood off his skin. Transfixed, Chuuya watches it all go down the drain. There is so much of it. Like he hasn't washed in three weeks even though it's been three days.

After Dazai turns off the faucet and superficially dries off his hands, he

starts tugging off Chuuya's clothes. The wine-red silk around his shoulders. The collar around his neck. The tie keeping his hair in a low ponytail. Dazai sinks to his knees to help him step out of the leather around his thighs. Stays there until the plain, black boxers are off too, and there is nothing but naked flesh.

Nothing but Chuuya and all the horrible things that hide underneath.

"In you go," Dazai says, directing him towards the shower.

The stream of water is hot, almost hot enough to burn through the silence that descends over his head but not enough to replace the warmth of Dazai's voice. But Chuuya stands under it obediently anyway, lets it soak him from head to toe, pressure pelting against his skin over and over and over and –

Until Dazai tells him to start scrubbing and he does that too.

After his body is clean and the water turned off, he steps out of the shower and into the towel that Dazai is holding out for him. Chuuya's eyes flutter closed as Dazai rubs him dry and shiny, basically new, only opening again once everything stills again.

He freezes when he sees himself in the mirror. The face in the reflection cannot be his. It's not possible. The lack of blood and dirt on his skin, the color in his eyes, the hair —

Dazed, he grasps a fistful and examines it. "That's not right. I lost."

"I can cut it for you." Dazai pulls the wet strands from his fingers. "What length are you thinking of?"

"How many centimeters are 25 lives worth?"

"It was one fight you lost, not 25," Dazai murmurs, driving his hand through his hair before turning around to look for a pair of scissors on the shelf.

Chuuya doesn't argue. His blank stare twitches when Dazai chops off a chunk of his hair, but the length becomes uneven. "You're an —" He barely gets the words out. "— awful hair-cutter."

A fierce urge to laugh hysterically strikes him, but he cannot. That graveyard of guilt inside him is so vast, so heavy and endless, that he cannot. He cannot laugh. He –

He cannot do anything but stare at all the buried bodies and stare, stare, stare –

It is the punishing weight of a hand curling around the back of his neck that pulls his gaze away from the corpses and toward the man in the mirror. “Out,” Dazai says, short and simple, and directs them out of the bathroom.

The cool room temperature outside makes Chuuya shiver, clutch the towel that’s wrapped around him somewhat tighter as he gets pushed down to sit at the edge of his bed. There is shuffling and the sound of clothes being shoved from side to side. Then Dazai appears in front of him, placing a pile by his side and taking one, a long black shirt. He nudges Chuuya’s arms until he stops holding himself and lifts them instead. Next are underwear and pants.

“What do you need?” Dazai asks.

Chuuya blinks. What does he need?

He needs…

He needs this to end.

He needs an out.

Chuuya swallows, drags his eyes to look Dazai in the eye, and says, “I was going to betray you. We were all going to betray the port mafia. We took the deal because it was the only way to save Shirase, but we never meant to become an actual part of you. We were going to betray you.”

“I know,” Dazai answers without even flinching.

Chuuya’s fingers start trembling. “I was going to kill you,” he hisses. “I was going to find a weakness and then use it to murder you and everyone else in the port mafia. I am a *traitor.”*

Dazai’s eyes gaze unwaveringly back at him. *“What,”* he says, pronouncing each word like it’s a punishment for that confession, “*Do. You. Need?”*

“I need you to act like the person that you’re supposed to be!” He’s on his feet and slamming his hands against Dazai’s chest in seconds. “I was going to betray you and your people!” He shoves him again. “The mafia has a strict code for traitors, so be a good leader and punish me,

damn it!" And again, until Dazai's crowded against the wall behind him. "I am a traitor! A traitor! A traitor, Dazai! Act like that *means* something!"

"You were lying, but you weren't good at it," Dazai says with a stare that does not falter, "and you were never going to kill me."

It makes Chuuya snarl and lunge forward, reaching for Dazai's neck until he can wrap his hand around it and squeeze. Hard. "I didn't then, but I can do it now. I can crush you wind-pipe until it's nothing but bloody goo between my fingers, and then I can let your people find me and kill me too. I *can."*

There is something wrong with Dazai's gaze - -steady, confident, patient. Full of trust. Wrong, wrong, *wr*—

"What are you waiting for?"

A broken sound slips out of Chuuya's chest. His fingernails dig into Dazai's skin, his arm shakes, his teeth clench, but he can't do it. He can't kill Dazai. He wants to rid himself of this paralyzing grief so badly that he would do anything.

Anything — just not this.

Not when Dazai is the only one left who can still look him in the eye. The only one unafraid to provoke him without flinching in fear. The only that sees Chuuya and every horrible side-effect of his existence and doesn't turn away.

Dazai is the shoreline and Chuuya is drowning.

He can't bring himself to kill Dazai, but he can't bear his vicious kindness either.

Chuuya reaches back again but Dazai is faster this time, catching his arm and effortlessly slamming Chuuya cheek-first against the wall.

"You want punishment?" Dazai breathes into his ear. "I can give you that. I can give you a million different punishments — punishments you haven't even heard of, that you haven't even dreamed of, Chuuya – but what I'm not going to do is kill you for crimes that you only ever committed in that head of yours." Hot breath washes over Chuuya's ear. "I am *not* killing you, and I won't let anyone else kill you either because I made you a promise and I keep my promises. So tell me what you need. What do you need from me to function? Punishment?

Pain? Purpose? A chance to kill the person that is responsible for all of this? Tell me, and I'll make it happen. Tell me, and I'll fix you, I'll hold you together for as long as you need me to, I'll give you whatever you need, but I am *not* going to kill you."

Chuuya struggles against the hold for another few seconds until his posture collapses and the strength in his legs gives way beneath him, bringing him to his knees.

"What do you need?" Dazai asks for the thousandth time, following him down to the ground. *"Tell me."*

Chuuya's throat lets out an ugly and horrible sound. Something that sounds as bad as it hurts. A wail. "Give me my friends back," he whispers. "I want my friends back."

A hand squeezes his shoulder. "You know I can't give you that. Tell me what you *need*."

"I need –" Chuuya coughs, gasping for breath. "I need you to stop this." Stray, silent tears drip to the floor. "I need to feel something else. Anything. *Please."*

Arms slide around his waist. Someone places their chin on his shoulder. "Okay," Dazai murmurs. "I can do that. Just let it out for now. Give it another minute. And then I will make it stop."

"I don't want to," Chuuya snarls because his chest will crack open and everything inside will spill out if he has to feel this even for a few seconds longer. Because it hurts. It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts. "I *can't."*

But Dazai keeps holding him and Chuuya keeps dying over and over and over, a thousand knives slicing through his souls, and there is nothing that he can do to stop it, nothing anyone can do to stop it — nothing that even Dazai can do.

Until Dazai slides his fingers around his neck, cutting off enough air to lessen the violent rise and fall of his chest. "There is a man out there," he starts then, "who thinks he can play god and decide what sort of people should live and what sort shouldn't. And make no mistake, he is good. He is clever. Brilliant, actually. But contrary to what he thinks of himself, he is no god. He is human, just like you and me, and the wonderful thing about us humans is how fragile our lives are. He can be killed." Each breath is a fight with Dazai's hand around his neck but each one is worth fighting as the world narrows down to the

words being whispered into his ear only, everything around it melting away. “He won’t make it easy. He will do whatever is necessary to get what he wants. He will take even more than he already has. But it’s not impossible. And here’s what I need from *you* to make it happen, Chuuya. Are you listening?”

Chuuya nods shakily.

“I need you at your best,” Dazai tells him. “I need you to give me your all because your all is worth more than a thousand armies. And for you to be at your best, I need you to focus. I need you to wrap up your pain, put it into a box and place the box somewhere far away for now. Can you do that for me?”

The clutch around his neck begins to soften. Chuuya’s lungs gulp for air, his face has turned stiff and crusty from the salt but the tears have stopped flowing. He nods again.

“I need you to say it.”

“I can,” he whispers. “I can do that for you.”

Dazai squeezes his hand – the hand that has been digging hard enough into Dazai’s arm to leave bruises. “Good,” he murmurs. “That’s good, Chuuya. Now, do you think you can get up, or do you need to stay here for a minute longer?”

Chuuya shakes his head, missing the warmth that leaves him when Dazai rises to his feet but accepting it in the form of the hand that Dazai offers him instead. He holds onto it for another moment when he looks at Dazai. “I need something else.”

“Tell me,” Dazai says simply. Just like that.

“I need him to die.” His fingers clench around Dazai’s hand. “I need them *all* to die.”

Dazai's answer is not loud nor jubilant, but it is clear: it is a nod, and it is more than enough.

And it is at this exact moment that Chuuya makes the decision.

He lets go of Dazai but only to drop to one knee in front of him and lower his head. “I promise to you –”

“Chuuya, you don’t –”

“*I promise to you, Dazai Osamu,”* he says firmer this time, ignoring his weak noise of protest, “I will give my blood — my everything — to protect you and the port mafia. I will lay down my life in your hands so you can do whatever you deem necessary to achieve your goals. And everyone who stands in your way will learn firsthand how merciless the two us can be. I will kill, die, and —” his eyes slide up, up, up to the man above. “— I will live for you and only you.”

Dazai stares at him in silence for a heartbeat before extending his hand to Chuuya.

Chuuya glances at it, takes a deep breath, and then accepts it, letting Dazai help him get to his feet.

It is the beginning of an alliance — and the beginning of the end.

END OF PART II

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter we have:
- a new location
- a new ally (that might or might not be a clown and a casino manager)
- and lots of new problems >:)

Chapter 28: Russian Roulette

Chapter Notes

> Warnings: explicit sexual content, and for anyone who may be sensitive to dub-con: there is a dismissal of several “stop”s during the sex scene. The safe word is never uttered, so I personally don’t consider it dub-con; others might though, so proceed with caution! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

PART III: THE YOUNG ROSE

[Tokyo, 10.08.2020 04:06]

Almost a year after joining his organization, Tanaka Shouyou still gets assigned basic duties like standing guard. Don’t get him wrong, it’s not that difficult. All he needs to do is keep watch all night and report anything unusual to his superiors. That gives him plenty of time to think, self-reflect — that kind of thing. But it’s also unfulfilling.

The reason why he decided to join in the first place was that he believes in their cause. He wants to change the world into a better, safer place. He wants to be part of the resistance. He wants to do something to quell the rage that overcomes him with every new 'incident' he hears about on the radio.

But according to the other members, he is already doing something by being here and protecting one of their many bases. For now, it has to be enough. For the grand cause at the end of it all, he will be patient.

His proud smile falters at the sound of staggering footsteps. He's already reaching for his weapon in his holster when he catches sight of the source of the noise: a short, disheveled figure wearing nothing more than a hospital gown, their crimson hair standing out against the sickly pallor of their skin as they clutch the wall for support.

“Help me,” they breathe out, a line of blood trickling down their arm. “Please. Help.”

“What –” Tanaka scans the area around him, wondering where this person came from. “How did you get here?"

The figure takes a step closer. “I escaped. Please help me get away.

Please.”

Oh, he thinks. Oh, so it’s one of *them.*

Recalling the protocol he had to memorize months ago, Tanaka nods, gently, despite the way his entire chest bristles. He then approaches them, reaching for the radio at his waist to activate the alarm inside. “I’ll help you. Of course. What’s your name?”

“Please,” they whisper. “Just get me out of here. I want to go home.”

“I’ll help you. You can trust me.”

The person nods weakly, even offering him the shadow of a grateful smile as he reaches them.

“Let’s get you out of here.”

And back inside.

Suddenly, the back doors of the building fling open and an army of people rush out to surround the fugitive with a barrage of weapons. Despite the wounded look of betrayal, Tanaka stands back with a cold, blank expression.

Change can only be achieved through discipline and perseverance. As soon as you take your guard down, you expose yourself to a weakness they will exploit without hesitation.

But not anymore.

Not with him.

Tanaka is pleased to see that the figure stops struggling against the hold on them after just a few seconds, resigning to their fate. Good.

“Give us a hand, Tanaka-kun,” one of the elder's orders. He nods, rushing to cover their backs as they lead the figure inside, a sickly yellow light permeating the endless passageway in front of them.

“Hey.”

Tanaka doesn’t realize it’s the escapist talking to him until they glance over their shoulder at him. “Hey,” they say again. “Want to know my name?”

His brows furrow. Where is this sudden shift in tone suddenly coming

from?

“It’s Chuuya.”

As soon as the words leave their mouth, Tanaka's body becomes heavy, so heavy that it crushes him against the floor.

“Nakahara Chuuya.”

The last thing he sees before he dies is *red.*

***

“Twenty-three of their members in half an hour. Impressive.”

Chuuya, standing by the bathroom sink, shrugs as Dazai wipes the last traces of dried blood off his face. “That was the point.”

Dazai hums. “I can’t say I’m a fan of their prosthetic eye strategy though. The moment someone with information gets into enemy hands, someone behind the scenes activates their kill switch, and we are left with nothing.”

“Have they found anything useful on the harddrives?"

“A virus started shredding all of their data as soon as someone raised the alarm. I have our best tech team take a look at it right now and see if anything’s salvageable,“ he meets Chuuya’s blank stare, “but I doubt they’ll be successful. The man behind it all is too smart for that.”

They have been locating and attacking every base that’s associated with the Bishop’s staff over the past week. Always with the same results. A lot of dead people and no viable information to go on. It reminds Dazai a lot of the myth of the hydra snake: cut off one head and two more will grow in its place.

“You’ll figure something out.”

"Chuuya's kind words mean a lot to me,” Dazai teases, “but we will still have to switch tactics soon.”

A nod. “Anything else?”

At last, Dazai discards the towel and dusts off his hands. “Not for now. There are still two hours left until we arrive.”

It seems to be the permission that Chuuya has been waiting for to curl his fingers in Dazai's collar and drag him down into a kiss that sputters with leftover adrenaline from the fight. Unlike *no longer human* Dazai's task isn't to nullify that energy but to amplify it, match it spark for spark, and breath for breath until it comes to an explosive peak. He meets Chuuya's firm lips with just as much force, retaliates for the sharp teeth in his lower lip by knotting his fingers in Chuuya's scalp and yanking him back, hard. Chuuya's sharp hiss grants him entry to his mouth.

Dazai only gets the bare sliver of his tongue before Chuuya's whole body vibrates impatiently against him. "You're taking too long," he breathes out, trying to push Dazai past the threshold and get his hands on his zipper at the same time.

"That's because you've been deluded into thinking that multi-tasking saves time," Dazai is so kind to inform him and draws back to make his point. It's only been a minute since Chuuya fell over him like a starving hyena, but his cheeks are already flushed, his chest rising and falling rapidly, and pupils so blown one might think it's cocaine that's pumping through his veins instead of lust. That and eagerness and the permanent flicker of anger that has been fueling him for the past few weeks. It's like a debauched daydream come true.

What's more is the way he meets Dazai's invasive stare, his chin raised and nostrils flaring – despite trembling from adrenaline.

This time, it's Dazai who grasps his neck with one hand and tips his jaw up to kiss him, a self-centered move that just makes Chuuya bite back even more aggressively, try to rip off his clothes faster. He manages to tear apart Dazai's shirt first, the buttons flying in all directions. Dazai rallies by working his zipper open and pushing the fine leather and cotton around his thighs down, met with the exciting sight of Chuuya's cock, already hard and flushed at the tip where it curves against his abs.

"Been thinking about this a long time now, have you?" Dazai murmurs against Chuuya's arched neck as he gives him a few strokes, dry and teasing but enough for Chuuya to hiss and dig his fingers into Dazai's back begging for more.

"Was it this that was on your mind when you killed those people?" His head tilts until their mouths are only a breath shy away from each other, gazes interlocking. "Being fucked senseless like the good little slut you are?"

Chuuya's pupils grow, darkening before he sneers, "And what if it was? Don't act like you're any better."

Dazai smears his responding grin against the corner of his mouth, teeth drawing a growl out of him. So much fire and bark on the outside, but underneath, something in Chuuya has stilled, frozen in time. It's getting harder to coax a fight out of him these days. Not the snappish reactions that are more automatic than they are genuine, nor the physical reflexes to Dazai's nagging, nor the fury at all their enemies either, but the real thing. That which makes Chuuya who he is.

But broken pieces, broken people, and broken souls are Dazai's area of expertise — whether he is tearing someone apart or piecing them back together — so he takes this part of Chuuya for what it is: raw, tender, broken, and beautiful, worshipping it as he worships the rest of him.

Chuuya jerks a little when their kiss turns slow and sweet if only so Dazai can retrieve the travel-sized bottle of lube he always carries with him nowadays, but keeps his protests to himself when he sees the source of the delay.

"Fucking finally," Chuuya mutters, and the last syllable of his sentence bleeds into a low gasp when two fingers slide into him without further ado. Not that it deters him for long. As soon as Dazai is knuckles-deep inside him, he starts rocking back against him, pulling and clawing at his back to urge him on.

He gives Chuuya what he's asking for and a little more, the rhythm quick, dirty, and precise — too precise — because the encouraging groans quickly escalate into harsh, sobbing breaths and over-stimulated full-body tremors from being driven to the edge too fast — and there is nothing that Chuuya hates more than a wasted orgasm.

"Stop," he gasps against Dazai's mouth, writhing and shaking in his grip. Chuuya's legs are trapped by his pants and underwear, pinned between Dazai's chest and the arm reaching behind him to finger him. "*Stop,* or I'll –" Chuuya whines helplessly. "Or I'll come – stop, stop, stop!"

It only triggers the opposite of his pleas though. Dazai's grin sharpens, giving him no respite from the avalanche of pleasure. "Do you think I give a damn?"

The hands that Chuuya has fisted in his hair tighten, thighs shuddering with tension.

“Hold off, or don’t. Either way, I’m getting what I want.”

“Fuck you,” Chuuya growls.

Dazai’s free hand shoots up to seize his jaw like he’s throttling a wild beast when Chuuya bares his teeth, even as his eyes roll back in his head. “Do you really believe you’re in a position to argue right now?” he murmurs before leaning closer to his ear. “Do you think you are *safe* with me, Chuuya?”

The reaction is instant and enrapturing.

Chuuya’s muscles stiffen, bringing his breath to a halt. Then he lets out a shuddering exhale, and it’s like the floodgates break with the orgasm sweeping through him, his whole body shivering and trembling, walls clenching tightly around Dazai’s fingers as he muffles the whimpering noises that escape him in Dazai’s palm.

Dazai spares his shirt, spotty with Chuuya’s cum, only a single glance, too busy milking every last drop out of him, taking everything that he’s got to give, and drinking up all those pathetic, little sounds. Because as soon as the last trace of pleasure washes through Chuuya, he clamps up around his fingers, trying to squirm away as it all gets too much too soon. Even his legs start to give out, and that’s saying something considering it’s Chuuya that they’re talking about.

“What?” Dazai challenges, softening his grip around his chin to stroke his thumb over his flushed lips. “Too much, baby?” He tilts his head. “Already giving up?”

Practically sagging against the doorway, Chuuya sobs out a breath. “Fuck you,” he rasps. “Fuck you, fuck you, fuck…“ His voice wavers at a particular mean grind of Dazai’s fingers inside him, eyes screwing shut. “…you,” he manages to whisper at last, though he no longer means it, judging by the mist on his eyes.

As much as he enjoys torturing Chuuya, his wrist is starting to ache, so he is grateful to be able to slow down and pull out. Shaking out his hand, Dazai more or less pulls Chuuya back to his feet with the other before squatting down to help him step out of the pants and underwear. By the time, he rises back to his full height, Chuuya’s already obediently raising his arms so Dazai can take off his shirt, leaving him in nothing but the black collar around his neck — a striking contrast against Dazai, who is still covered in a few dozen layers. Since he loves the picture they make, he pulls his cock out without taking off the slacks around his hips and only bothers with his

zipper.

Chuuya's eyes instantly zero in on the hand that gives himself a few pumps, smearing lube around his dick, but he doesn't move, doesn't breathe, doesn't get handsy despite the greedy look in his eyes.

Dazai rewards him by not letting him wait too long. A moment later, he has a hand around Chuuya's thigh, pulling it up and around his waist as he lines himself up with the other one. Chuuya stills at the first push in, smothering his breath against his shoulder. Then Dazai slides inside and the fingers around him turn into claws.

"My turn now," Dazai says, practically slamming him against the doorway as he pins Chuuya's arms above him. He doesn't let Chuuya answer either. His hips drive into Chuuya again and again in quick, rhythmic thrusts that stimulate his prostate just enough to let him feel the lingering aftershocks of his first orgasm.

He throws his head back, mouth open in a long moan. It drives Dazai a little insane if he has to be honest. How loud Chuuya gets once the barriers get mowed down. How shameless. Every basal instinct put on display just for *him*.

Just like right now. His eyes roll back in the back of his head and he practically screams when Dazai slows down to grind his cock deep inside him. It's such a beautiful sound, the tight heat that clenches around him even more beautiful so that Dazai has to smother a hiss of his own in Chuuya's neck before his instincts take over and he starts fucking into him like a man possessed.

Chuuya gasps and shudders, presses tighter against him as best as he can, and bites into a bare spot between the bandages around his shoulder, a tumultuous fight between pleasure and overstimulation. But it's when Dazai allows him to drop his arms from above and they immediately wind around his neck, making Chuuya pant loudly in his ear that makes the first prickle of orgasm shoot through the base of his stomach.

Dazai readjusts the thigh around his waist so they're pressed against each other, Chuuya's cock, already hard again, trapped between them. "I think you should come again. Just like this."

Chuuya's walls clench around him in reply — the only answer he gets.

"Chuuya," Dazai murmurs, dragging him back with a hand in his hair so they're face to face, only hot air between them. "Now."

But Chuuya shakes his head, whimpering softly, aroused enough to feel it again, but not there yet. “I *can’t.”*

“Do you want to spend the next two hours sitting on my cock without moving?”

Chuuya’s breath hitches, and even though going the next few hours without any orgasm at all would drive him mad, Dazai can feel a part of him lust after the idea anyway.

“Of course you’d want to be a good little cockwarmer,” Dazai mocks lovingly, and apologizes by giving him several pointed thrusts. “Just sitting around and keeping me satisfied all day? Is that what you want? Should we do that then instead of this?”

Chuuya pulls his arms tighter around him, biting the answer into Dazai’s neck. They both know what would come out if he spoke.

Dazai tugs his face back into his vision and spreads his hand around his chin until Chuuya has no choice but to look at him, face glistening with sweat, eyes drooping with pleasure.

“Now,” Dazai murmurs, dragging the word over his mouth. Chuuya’s muscles tense. He whimpers. “*Now*.”

Chuuya shakes his head side to side like he is both trying to fight it and trying to fight *for* it. Those noises taste sweeter than fine wine as the struggle reaches its peak, and he comes again.

Smiling, Dazai fucks him through it, brushing the sweaty bangs out of his face as Chuuya shudders through his orgasm, crying and whimpering until he all but sags forward.

Dazai lets him catch his breath for all but ten seconds before dragging them both to the ground. Chuuya lets out a low hiss as he ends up on top of Dazai, feeling Dazai’s cock butting up against his prostate once again, especially as Dazai spreads his feet so he can lean back and brace himself with his hand.

“I said my turn, didn’t I?” Dazai says when Chuuya shoots him an exhausted death glare even as he does exactly as he is told.

“I hate you,” he murmurs with no real heat behind his words. “I hate _”

Dazai starts bouncing him on his cock before he can finish the

sentence, the insult bleeding into a high-pitched gasp that grows louder with each thrust. Like that, with Chuuya clenching around him from hypersensitivity, it's all too easy to lean in the tight, hot ball of pleasure pooling in the pit of Dazai's stomach, growing and growing until –

Dazai throws his head back, letting out a guttural groan as his dick throbs and he comes. With a hand around Chuuya's hip, he manages a few more grinds, trying to fuck his cum as deep as possible. Hopefully, so a part of him will never leave again, stay there until the end of times, a permanent reminder that he was here once. That he lived.

The hot-white bliss of pleasure pumps through him for another minute or so before it fizzles out and leaves him hyper-aware and worn out. And that's of course when Chuuya comes in, clenching around him again like it's his personal act of revenge for being forced to come on command earlier. Like he wouldn't have asked for it anyway.

Hissing softly, Dazai squeezes his thigh in a warning. Chuuya grunts something indecipherable under his breath before he finally relaxes, and falls back against Dazai's raised thighs. The floor is the least bit comfortable, especially with Chuuya's dead-weight on top of him, but Dazai pretends it is the soft mattress of a bed.

"I need a shower," Chuuya eventually murmurs somewhere above him.

"And a nap."

The reply to that is a foot shoving Dazai's face away none-too-gently as Chuuya heaves himself off his dick and the floor, face twisting into a grimace because of the mess it makes. "No time for that," he mutters and picks up his discarded pair of underwear from the floor to wipe himself off. "This was my last fucking pair."

Dazai faces no such problems. only having to tuck himself back inside before he scrambles up into a sitting position against the other side of the threshold. "I'll buy you new ones."

Chuuya only humphs in reply on his way to the shower.

As the water starts running in the background, Dazai gets back to his feet. He changes into more comfortable clothes while he still can, a matching set of grey sweatpants and sweater, and flops down on the bed that has been both his and Chuuya's haven for the last two weeks — even if Chuuya rarely uses it to sleep — and checks his phone for

all the fires that must have started while he has been busy just now.

As expected messages come rolling in like the tide, though much to his surprise, most of them are only level three or four of importance. A quiet day in the middle of an ongoing conflict? That is bound to have consequences. In war, there is no such thing as an idle moment. Only the illusion of it.

Speaking of the devil's fruit, there is a knock on the door. Dazai's eyes lazily slide to Chuuya's pants, still on the floor but not in a necessarily dirty way. Ah, no, they are not worth the trouble of getting up. "Come in."

Gin enters with a tablet against their chest and greets him with a curt bow of their head and a, "boss."

"Gin darling," he says, winding a hand around the back of his head as he leans against the headboard. "What terrible news are you bringing me today?"

"Unfortunately, two more of our clients have cut ties with us in light of the recent events."

Meaning the fact that Dazai's face has been all over the news lately. Despite the lack of any traces to his identity, the same people who gathered the video footage in the first place have already linked him to the port mafia: the Bishop's Staff. He has to admit that labeling him as a terrorist and turning the spotlight of the entire country on him and consequently on the port mafia was a clever move. Something he might have come up with if it was his goal to make an organization syndicate sweat. The thing, however, is that they — that *he* — gravely underestimates the number of people that don't care about who or what they are working with as long as they get their precious money. It's the mafia, for crying out loud. Of course it's not a place filled with saints.

The people that do however pull back…

"Spineless cowards," Dazai mutters and flicks his fingers. "Let Piano Man take care of them."

Gin nods, not at all surprised to hear that the punishment for cowardice will be epic social, economical, and political ruination. So much worse than death. "The interrogation unit now has three viable hostages thanks to Oe Nami. They should report back with new information soon."

If you ask Dazai, Oe Katsuo is another coward that should get the Piano Man treatment. His sister, however… Her gift of freezing people in time comes in handy when they are fighting against soldiers that are controlled by a camera and a kill switch in their eyes. Very useful, that woman. Not a cure to the problem, but certainly a helping hand. You could call it an analgesic.

Dazai lets his smile shine. “Wonderful.”

“Otherwise, we’ve lost another seven members on a raid of one of the bases,” Gin prattles on, eyes lowering to their iPad, because not all news can be this good. “Three rogue yakuza members from South Tokyo attacked one of our warehouses. Our white reaper squad was nearby and quickly put an end to the incident, so no lives were lost, but we are waiting for your instructions on whether to punish the clans involved. According to Izumi, they claimed to be deserters, but in times like these,” their eyes lift to meet Dazai’s, “setting an example would be beneficial.”

Dazai hums, outweighing the risks and advantages of starting another feud before he nods. “Do it.” If they cannot control their rabid dogs, then someone should. And it’s strategically more important to appear just as bold, if not bolder, as before. Even if that means taking a calculated risk.

“A group of the Osaka members was spotted in Suribachi city yesterday.” They look at Dazai. “You told me to inform you if that happened.”

He taps his fingers against the side of his neck, not too pleased. “How many?”

Gin frowns at the iPad. “Five, as of now.”

“Put one of Piano Man’s team on them. They are only to observe the situation for now but I want to know what they want here as soon as possible.”

“An entire team? Are you sure?”

There are several excellent spy teams under Piano Man's intelligence unit, but the better they are, the rarer. During wartime, spies are more needed than ever, which makes every single one of them extremely valuable. “Trust me, I’m sure,” he says though. They will need it if the Osaka Mafiosi are here looking for revenge because a certain little lamb couldn’t keep his mouth shut when he still had one.

In the bathroom, the water shuts off.

Gin nods. “Okay, and last one: there have been rumors about someone who apparently has inside information about the bishop’s staff. He calls himself, uh, the king…” They visibly force back a cringe before continuing. “I figured you’d be interested in checking out what it’s about.”

“Sure, let a grunt do that,” he tells them with a dismissive wave. “And be a darling and let one of the flight attendants bring me something to eat, will you?”

“Of course, boss.” Gin doesn’t need more than that to bid their goodbyes and slip out of the door. A moment later, the room fills with steam, heat, and a bare-chested Chuuya, waltzing out with only a towel around his hips, damp hair falling to one side.

“Was that Gin?” he asks, heading straight towards the dresser on the other side of the room.

Dazai hums in reply.

“Something happen?”

“Nothing that’s worth mentioning.”

The towel drops to the floor, and Dazai has the privilege of admiring Chuuya’s toned and perky backside just a moment before he bends down and tugs on a new pair of leather pants, which hug his skin well but do not quite match the real asset beneath.

“You know, I don’t see the issue in you not having any underwear.”

Chuuya shoots him a flat stare over his shoulder.

“These clothes aren't the best for sleeping in though,” he adds.

“I wasn’t planning to,” Chuuya mutters. “I told you that.”

“I ignored it since it didn’t make any sense to me. Still doesn’t.”

“Sounds like a you problem.”

Except it isn’t.

Not when Chuuya turns around and his eyes start searching for something. He shoots a scowl at Dazai after trying this for a minute.

“Where’s your coat?”

“Why?” Dazai asks, playing dumb. “Did you run out of jackets too?”

Chuuya’s tongue pokes his cheek in irritation and he decides to ignore Dazai and search for it himself. Another look in the dresser. Nope. Under the bed. Nope. On the floor. Nope. He opens the door of their room at the same time as a subordinate comes in, carrying a tray with two bowls.

They stare at one another in bewilderment. The young mafioso surprised. Chuuya just annoyed. Then he pushes past her and walks away searching the rest of the aircraft.

Sighing, Dazai puts on a false, cheery grin as he accepts the food and thanks her. He nibbles at his crab rings and waits for Chuuya to come back, which he does after five minutes.

Judging by the sour expression on his face, his efforts have been in vain, but he is also determined not to voice his frustration.

Dazai lifts a crab ring. “Want one?”

“Not hungry,” Chuuya mutters, grabbing a folder of his personal things.

“What about this then?” Dazai asks, and as Chuuya casts another annoyed glance his way, Dazai shows off a little bag of cocaine.

Dazai has to give it to him. The reaction is subtle: a flex of his fingers, a twitch in his jaw. Little things. He doesn’t bite though. Not yet. “What do you want in return?” he asks instead.

“Hmm, let’s see,” Dazai says to himself. “How about you take a nap and get this for breakfast in return?”

Chuuya blows out a breath. “How many times do you want me to say it? I’m not fucking tired, and there’s not enough time to sleep anyway, so –”

“There is time. Here. Right now.” Dazai gestures at all the space on the bed. “Beds don’t only exist for fucking on them, you know.”

“That’s rich coming from someone who never slept except for a few pitiful naps now and then,” Chuuya snaps.

“It was still sleeping, whether it’s thirty minutes or six hours.”

“That still doesn’t make you any better.”

Seeing that Chuuya is dead set on spending his… fiftieth hour on his feet without a single wink of sleep, Dazai decides to put the topic to rest for now and continue it later instead — when Chuuya no longer has the excuse of there being ‘no time.’

Originally, Dazai thought that fucking him brainless would have done the job, but alas.

Chuuya is stubborn.

“How about this then,” Dazai switches lanes, “you eat a little, and then get some.”

After a moment, Chuuya's scowl falls with his chest. He sighs. *“Fine.”* He drags his feet to the bed like he is being forced to do maths homework instead of eating food, climbing up to sit cross-legged next to Dazai.

He eats it with as much enthusiasm as a child eating its vegetables.

“You don’t have to do this, you know,” Chuuya says after a few moments.

Dazai’s eyes remain peacefully closed. “Do what?”

“Take care of me.” He hears Chuuya force out a breath, the sound of chopsticks listlessly knocking against the bowl. “I’m not going to fucking fall apart just because I skip a night of sleep. or a meal. I’m fine.”

Dazai could talk about the fact that it’s not just a single night of sleep but that it’s Chuuya trying to avoid the nightmares that come to visit him every time he closes his eyes. Or the fact that the more sleep he loses, the easier it is to let control slip, let *Arahabaki* slip, and that he might not want that to happen again. Or the fact that a tired Chuuya that doesn’t take care of himself doesn’t really make a good soldier — still outperforming most of the port mafia, but he is not as good as he could be. As he can be.

Instead, though, he says, “Aren’t you always on my ass about me not sleeping enough?”

“Yeah, but that’s different.”

Dazai opens his eyes to squint at him. “How?”

Chuuya blinks. “It just is.”

“That’s not a real answer, Chuuya. Come on, we both know you can do better than that.”

“I’m not trying to do anything. I’m just –” Blowing out a forceful breath, he shoves a chunk of food into his mouth and chews angrily for a few moments. “You’re the boss,” he eventually says, the heat gone, replaced with something tired and still. “You need your sleep because your people need you to function. *I* need to do whatever it takes to keep you protected. Even if it means I lose sleep in return.”

“That,” Dazai points a chopstick at him, “is complete bullshit.”

He receives an unhappy noise in reply.

“‘To keep me safe and protected’?” He scoffs. “Do you know what would keep me safe and protected? A bodyguard who isn’t sleep-deprived. *That* would ensure my safety. *That* would make me happy. You're running away from your problems and using me as an excuse. At leat have the decency to admit it.”

He expects another rebuttal. Maybe an insult. He doesn’t expect Chuuya to give in that easily, even though a part of him still hopes for it.

Chuuya not saying anything at all wasn't what he anticipates.

Dazai tips his head to the side, watching him take one listless but firm bite after another. Quietly.

“You don’t have anything to say?” he eventually asks.

Chuuya’s shoulder lifts listlessly.

“Nothing at all?”

“Why bother if you're only going to hear what you want to hear?"

Using Dazai’s most loathed weapon against him — the silent treatment — is cruel. Admittedly clever, but *cruel*. Not the kind he enjoys.

Dazai’s mind races for possible counter-attacks. If even Chuuya's vow to protect him doesn't work, then there truly aren’t many options left.

"Okay," he replies. And then sniffs loudly. “I’m so sorry for trying to help you despite not being perfect at it myself! I guess I will have to fix myself first before ever trying to talk to you about anything else again.” After slipping off the bed, he offers Chuuya a tight smile that’s laced with self-depreciation. “Now excuse me while I need to discuss something with Albatross before we touch ground – stay put. There’s no need to protect me from anyone on this plane,” he adds so Chuuya won’t even get the idea of following him out of here too.

Chuuya’s eyes rigidly follow him to the door, though he doesn’t get up from the bed nor say anything either.

“I’ll see you later.”

After the door shuts behind, Dazai stays there for a moment, lips pursed in thought.

As much as he is glad Chuuya is stubborn, he is also concerned that this is what he decided to be stubborn about. On any other day, Dazai can match this stubbornness no problem, but when Chuuya leaves him no space to act, it gets hard.

He pushes himself away from the door when one of the crew members passes him, her eyes darting to him and away again like she is not sure whether greeting him is the polite thing to do or pretending not to see his little public moment of hesitation. She ends up bowing her head curtly and hurrying off.

Dazai decides to do the same as he walks along the corridor, painted in steel-black colors.

This plane they’re on has been a project that the port mafia has been polishing for four years now — set in motion by Mori, but the idea had been planted by Dazai after he had captured Herman Melville on a mission in North America.

They had intel that a secret society called the Guild had plans to come to Yokohama on a quest to obliterate the city to find a little special book that’s rumored to be here. Where exactly that intel came from, Dazai never told Mori, and never had to either. It was a waste of time to ask the demon prodigy questions rather than take action. And Io and behold, Dazai gathered enough evidence to convince Mori to form a special OP to ruin the guild before they could ever try to ruin the city. He spent two and a half weeks walking the streets of the land of the free — or whatever it is that people like to call it — and came back as an executive and several new port mafia recruits. Herman

Melville, who used to be the leader of the guild until that job was taken from him, especially interested Dazai. His ability — the Moby-Dick — takes the form of a mechanic white whale that can float in the sky. A living, beautiful thing — at least, until the guild took it and mechanized 70% of it into an air fortress. Maybe not as beautiful as a white whale but surely just as brilliant. That was hard to deny, even though Melville's old eyes still carried the shadows of imprisonment.

The solution was quite easy. Dazai promised Melville and his ability freedom in exchange for a blueprint of the Guild's air fortress and his help in recreating not only one of them but a *dozen.* So it would no longer be an ability. No longer dependent on one person only. And no longer threatened to poof out of existence if Dazai decided to board it.

Four years later, he is strolling down the halls of his shiny, new toy, which is currently serving as a temporary base while every organization with authority hunts the port mafia.

His destination is the cockpit where he finds Albatross chewing on a mint as the chatter of the radio runs in the background.

" — various foreign VIPs will be gathering on Standard Island next week in order to discuss recent events. An international corps is being discussed for combating global terrorism, sources say, and that –"

Dazai turns off the radio and falls into the seat beside him. "How is Yuan doing these days?" he asks in lieu of a greeting.

"Boss," Albatross mumbles, looking up at him in wide-eyed surprise. "She is doing what everyone would do if they were in her position. Her best. Kouyou keeps her busy." His eyes flicker down to his fingers tapping away on one knee. "She's *doing."*

"And has she talked to Chuuya recently?"

Albatross shoots him a look. "Shouldn't you be asking Chuuya that?"

Dazai responds with a flat stare. He would not have bothered to come all this way to discuss this if he could simply talk to Chuuya about it.

"Not as far as I know," Albatross relents. throwing his hands up. "I saw her try a couple of times when we were still at the HQ."

"Yes, I saw that too," Dazai says. "They haven't talked since then?"

"Nope."

Dazai lets out a small sigh, lifting his hand to rub the pulsating point between his eyebrows. He feels Albatross' gaze on him, asking wordless questions, but just like Chuuya has been avoiding talking to Yuan — or facing her, really — Dazai doesn't feel like talking about Chuuya with anyone other than him either.

"We should parent-trap them," Albatross suggests after a few minutes of silence. "Force them into a room together until they have no choice but to hug it out, y'know."

"Hugs won't be enough to solve the rift between them."

Not when that rift is twenty-five bodies wide and an ocean of guilt deep.

Albatross hmphs "But a conversation would, don't you think? They just don't *talk*. That's the problem."

Well, yeah.

Chuuya refuses to see her because he thinks Yuan hates him for what happened to their friends. But Dazai has seen her a few times since then. She's angry. Angry that her friends are dead. Angry at the Bishop's Staff. Angry at the world. But also angry that Chuuya left her — they belong once again to the same organization but he has done his best to avoid crossing paths with Yuan.

Technically, that could be resolved in a conversation. If only Chuuya ever did any talking these days.

"How long?" Dazai asks, nodding at all the machinery in front of him. So much of it, just not enough to tell him the time of their arrival.

"One hour and twenty-three minutes."

He nods. "Good." Then he nods again because he's not quite sure what to do with himself for the rest of that time if he is not with… Chuuya. "Very good."

"Do you need anything else from me, boss?"

"Nope."

"Oh… Want to play cards? Get a little exercise in before the real deal?"

"Please," Dazai says too quickly to hide his uncertainty. "Let's do that."

And so they do.

***

Two hours later, their aircraft touches down on Russian soil — Kalingrad, to be precise. Getting permission to enter the country would have been a political nightmare, mafia or not, which is why they are all the luckier that the Moby Dick 2.0 has the ability to cloak itself and render them completely invisible to their surroundings.

Their destination is called—

"*Sakoldowannoye Mesto*," Dazai murmurs, eyes fixed on the palace of violent delights standing tall, firm, and bedazzling in front of them. "It means *a bewitched place."*

Chuuya glances at him from the side. "You speak Russian?"

"But of course. Would be a bit dangerous to conduct our business here without being able to communicate, no?"

In the thick crowd of the queue, a bald, buff man pushes Dazai on his quest to skip the line, not nearly violently enough to make him lose his footing but enough to draw a cold glare from Chuuya.

"I can teach you as well if you want," Dazai says to coax the man's attention back to him and curls his lips into a silly grin. "Add it to your current syllabus."

"I don't see what I'd need it for."

"Well, we do have relationships with a few Russian companies. It always impresses them when you speak their language."

"So you do all the talking," Chuuya mutters, scanning their surroundings as they get three steps closer to the entrance. "If I have to step in, it'll be too late for words anyway."

That sounds like a good plan in theory. Before, it always worked — one was the brain, and the other was the heart.

However, Dazai won't always be around to do all the talking. And when that time comes…

Chuuya should have all the tools to continue business as usual.

Dazai switches tactics. "Don't you find it enraging to hear me talk all

the time?"

Chuuya looks him in the eye and flatly says, "No. You have a nice voice."

"Come again?" Dazai chuckles nervously. The words coming out of Chuuya's mouth are decidedly wrong. Very wrong. Cause for concern, actually.

"You heard me all right." And that sounds more like Chuuya. "You're the boss. I'm only here to ensure it stays that way."

The group of rowdy young women passes the security check, and the blank-faced bodyguards turn their attention to the two of them, signaling them to step through the ability detection device.

Hidden beneath Dazai's coat, he seeks out Chuuya's fingers to interlace them all while offering the bodyguards a beaming grin as they pass through. The warm hand he's holding only squeezes him back once they pass the check without any alarms going off, and they share a glance before another two security guards intercept them to check for any hidden weapons.

As Dazai diligently allows the stern-faced woman to frisk him from head to toe, the ability detection device starts beeping loudly. The people who have just passed through — a tall man that doesn't look to be much older than Dazai himself — get steered towards the other side of the front lobby where the administration staff starts asking questions and taking notes.

"I don't like it here," Chuuya tells him when they reunite. Dazai takes note of another group of people emerging from the ability user checkpoint: a bright red metal wristband identifying them for what they are, so they won't be able to cheat if their gifts are able to influence the result of a game.

He tips head to the side. "Why not? You like the arcade. This is similar but bigger, and for adults."

Chuuya's scowl turns into a puzzled blink. Dazai realizes too late why, but for some reason, his little slip-up doesn't get pointed out. "Just smells fishy in here."

"That's probably the people who are willing to risk selling their organs for the 1/10000th chance of winning one of the games."

It's like walking through a living kaleidoscope inside the casino, where the walls are mirrored, reflecting all the lights and the machines. However, it doesn't hide the people in question. The raw desperation in their eyes, as if they have nothing left to lose but only to gain, is far louder than the glitz.

It's a sad thing, to be driven so far that even getting shot in the head won't stop you from trying to make money, but it is the state of this country and practically every other as well. It is the kind of world that their ancestors have built for them.

"There." Dazai nods at an older man in faded, wrinkled clothes, staring at the countdown on the screen above with a deadly hunger in his eyes.

"I meant it figuratively. Not literally," Chuuya says with a click of his tongue. "I grew up on the streets. I'm used to smells."

Dazai's lips purse for a moment. Right. "Well, that's because a deranged clown is half-responsible for building this place."

From his side only comes a quiet grunt.

"Have you ever been anywhere outside of Japan?" he asks, fiddling with the sticks on one of the machines before looking at Chuuya.

That earns him a dry scoff. "Do I look like I have?"

"Very." And that is not a baseless lie. Not with a satin blazer draped around Chuuya's shoulders, long silver chains dangling from his neck — and the choker, of course, but with tiny diamond thorns sticking out of the leather. The outfit reminds Dazai of what Chuuya wore before he was dragged into the mafia, only a lot more expensive. "You look like a sophisticated young crime boss who has been all over the world by now."

Chuuya wrinkles his nose. "Now you're just describing yourself."

"You think I look sophisticated?" Clutching his chest, Dazai inspects his own outfit: a thick, long white coat, white slacks, and a white vest. Only the yellow tie and the dark-brown button-up shirt underneath are not white. It's a drastic transformation of his usual wardrobe, but since they are here in the land of the snow and all, Dazai figured he could dress up for the occasion. "Thank you, Chuuya. You don't know how much it means hearing that from you."

Chuuya tsks under his breath, clearly in no mood to prolong this conversation any further.

“I’ve been in Russia a handful of times before,” Dazai tells him anyway. “Last time when I was… hm.” He strokes his chin in thought. “Fourteen, I believe? Yes. It was a few months before I returned to Yokohama and helped someone slit the throat of the ex-ex-port mafia boss.”

Chuuya’s shoulders go stiff with surprise, even as he keeps track of the people passing by. “That was your father,” he guesses correctly.

Dazai nods enthusiastically. So Chuuya did listen to what was being said during the executive meeting weeks ago! “It was.” A tingle of melancholy runs across his lips. “Such a serious man, I’m telling you. So annoying.”

“Apparently, the apple does fall far from the tree.”

“Heh, I sure hope so. The old man went a little coo-coo in his last few years.” Dazai draws circles in the air with his index finger. “Wouldn't want to go down that path too.” Then he places a hand on Chuuya’s shoulders, nodding towards a table of blackjack. “This one.”

“Yeah?” Chuuya scans the area with a pair of razor-sharp eyes before approving Dazai’s choice. “Okay.”

There are five other players at the table, some of them welcoming Dazai with nothing but a blank look, and others eyeing him warily.

Since the objective is to buy time, Dazai starts simple. A player who is just here to waste a bit of money, who doesn’t count cards, and who does not cross paths with luck all too often.

At least until his shadow grows bored, his lack of interest in the substandard display of Dazai’s gambling skills smelling like the stale odor of disappointment. And, well, he has never claimed to be immune to the sin of pride. Not when it has to do with Chuuya.

Two rounds later, the constitution of the players has changed, two new ones in the mix, both of them Russian by the sounds of it. In one of them — let’s call him Vodka Breath — Dazai finds an amusing target. Not because the man is able to keep up with his wits, rather because he is so easily riled up, his every curse, clenched fist, and unnerved look in Dazai’s direction feeding his hunger for what Chuuya has denied him. Of course it’s all part of his act tonight too.

Dazai's not a child. Obviously.

That comes to an explosive peak when Dazai is total of 21 on the first two cards.

"You've been cheating this entire time," Vodka Breath exclaims and points an accusatory finger at him. "There's no way you could have done that without counting cards!"

He raises his eyebrows even more provocatively. "There is because I just did."

The man slams his hand against the table. "Bullshit!"

"Hey," Chuuya says, invading the man's personal space with a cruel sneer. "Watch yourself."

"Watch myself? You've got to be kidding me! *You* watch yourself. That owner of yours has been pulling dirty tricks all night and I – AH!" Chuuya slams his head against the table, crushing through wood and table with a bone-rattling sound. Dazai thinks he sees a tooth fly out.

Chuuya's expectant stare doesn't falter even when the man starts wailing, a few involuntary tears welling up in his eyes, mixing with blood and snot. "I told you to watch yourself. Don't make me say it a third time."

"Blyat, okay, okay! I'll shut up and go, I swear! Just l-l-let me go! I have a wife and two daughters at home!"

Chuuya's eyes narrow. After a pause, he gives the man another push — nothing fatal but it's enough to cause more physical agony — then lets go of him. With a blank look on his face, he returns to Dazai's side.

A small crowd of people has gathered around them, ever so noisy and ever so ready to reprimand them for causing a scene.

Dazai just sits back and spreads his arms. "Well, who wants to go next?"

***

One and a half hours, three rounds, and several glasses of whiskey, the clock strikes two in the morning, announcing the start of the infamous *games*.

See, aside from laundering money and hosting other illegal activities, the bewitched place is most known for its terribly cruel but profitable games it hosts every night — that is if you're lucky enough to come out alive and reap the benefits of the risk you've taken.

The games aren't always the same. Sometimes it's just a game of poker that bets on body organs rather than money, awarding the winner with 50% of the profit of that sale. Other times, it's a wheel of fortune — 95% of the options being death. Whatever the case may be, the casino's visitors trip over their feet to watch the spectacle all the same.

Today is no different.

As soon as Dazai and Chuuya get up to join the bloody festivities, the crowd almost swallows them. Almost, because Chuuya pushes everyone out of their personal space with chest and elbows, uninterested in the warning growls and dirty looks he receives for that. And so, they are one of the first ones to break through the swarm of drunkards and sadists and see the first type of game of a series of many other games tonight.

"Rrrrrrrussian roulette!" The green-haired host exclaims into the speaker with a thick Russian accent and waves his hand to enable the crowd to be even louder. "Nothing better than a good old-fashioned round of Russian Roulette, am I right? Are you excited? I'm excited! Davay, davay!"

Dazai glances at Chuuya to see his eyes already meeting him, a silent conversation passing between them that finishes with two small nods. They slip out of the crowded room and into a side passage.

The games are always held in separate rooms, protected by thick, impenetrable walls, which prevents accidental injuries in games like Russian roulette. Especially not the casino's royalty — the owner, who's only known as Sigma around here, and her deranged partner Nikolai Gogol — who only ever step out of the shadows of leadership at night, to follow the games from above. Like a true royal couple watching alligators fight in the arena below.

Although access to the management floor is heavily restricted and layered with armed security staff, an eerie silence hangs in the air when Dazai and Chuuya stroll down the hallways, passing a myriad of unconscious personnel on the floor. All thanks to the diligent mafia unit that has been busy scouring the entire place, securing it, and locking it down for the last two hours without making a sound.

“They were all left alive?” Chuuya asks after taking a closer look at one of the unconscious bodies.

One of the port mafia’s men is waiting at the elevator, giving Dazai a polite nod before they step inside. “The owner’s very fond of her staff, according to the chatter of birds. We only need to demonstrate that we could if we wanted to.”

Chuuya accepts that with a hum.

The elevator comes to a stop with a deep hum, revealing yet another hallway that’s in their control now. At the end of it, is the manager’s office, and their ticket to locating the final missing piece of the puzzle. If all goes well.

Dazai halts in front of the door to glance at Chuuya. “Ready?”

“I’m always ready,” Chuuya shoots back before jerking his head towards the side and tearing it wide open.

The sight that greets them is admittedly not something that even Dazai has expected.

The owner is perched atop the desk, her arms looped around the other man’s neck as they… furiously make out while the crowd below them selects the six participants who will take turns shooting themselves with a half-empty revolver.

Charming.

Even Chuuya — always ready for battle Chuuya — tenses next to him, not sure what to do.

The couple in front of them springs apart as soon as they notice the intrusion, of course, the haze of lust in their eyes quickly sharpening into deadly apprehension.

“Oh, don’t stop on my account,” Dazai is just quick enough to say before Nikolai Gogol is already moving to use his nasty little ability.

So is Chuuya though.

A heartbeat later, both Gogol and Sigma are pinned to the floor by gravity while the blade of a knife presses ghosts over Dazai’s throat.

Stalemate.

“Do you want to risk seeing each other die before even hearing us out, hm?” Dazai asks, grinning at the two rascals on the ground.

Sigma’s expression twists into a furious glare. “Who are you? What the hell do you want?”

“No, don’t ask what they want,” Gogol murmurs without taking his eyes off Dazai. An empty grin splits his face, emitting a murderous charge of energy. “Ask if they want to die now or later.”

Instantly, the gravity pressing down on him hardens, as does the knife against Dazai’s throat. Dazai takes the threat in stride. The blade twitches nervously when he lifts his fingers and presses them to each side of it, then stops moving altogether, the portal that it came from fading into nothing. Just to be sure, Dazai crosses the distance and squats down in front of Gogol before tapping him on the forehead.

“Now,” he says. “Let’s talk.”

And just like that even Gogol's maniacal expression wavers for a moment. Dazai savors the look of dumbfounded surprise, but keeps his condescending words to himself in favor of leaving this building with a pair of allies. Not enemies.

His eyes slide to Sigma, who’s looking at him with both fury and stunned surprise. “Sigma. I want you to tell me everything that you know about Fyodor Dostoevsky.”

“I don’t know who that is,” she hisses, jaw clenching. “And even if I did, I wouldn’t tell you.”

Dazai shoots Chuuya a look over his shoulder before returning his attention to this stubborn little person. “Then let’s go about it another way. Your entire casino?” he jerks his head around them. “It’s under my control now. Every single one of your security staff has been temporarily disabled.”

Next to him, Chuuya leans against the desk.

“Your clerks? Have been replaced by mine. The entire building is surrounded as well. That leaves you with two choices. You play along and tell me everything you know — and, Sigma dear, we both know that you will tell me anyway. Even without using your mouth. Or…” He pauses dramatically for the effect, stroking his fingers down his cheeks. “I go out there, on the balcony, kill your boyfriend while you watch, then knock you down a peg or two in front of the entire

audience. Or maybe I'll let your boyfriend take part in the game until he hits the jackpot. I bet that would be a fun change of perspective, wouldn't it?"

There is no response, just a piercing glower that cuts deeper and deeper into Sigma's skin the longer she stares back.

"And rest assured, you wouldn't get to die any time soon, no. First, you'd get to watch your beloved casino fall apart. Bit by bit. Not only because you wouldn't be in control anymore but because your customer base would start to dwindle day by day. I mean, who would want to visit a casino that can't even protect itself? They would know that you're only a puppet manager, and they would know that it's no longer safe here. It would be slow, but it would end in financial and cultural ruin.

"And once *that* happens… once you've seen everything that you worked so hard to build crumble into ash and dust, I'd turn you over to the authorities, who'd probably treat you even worse. You'd end right where you began, Sigma. Alone. In chains. And, most importantly," he makes sure to look her in the eyes when he speaks, *"without a trace of identity."*

Growing rabid, Gogol jerks, trying to escape gravity's grip. Obviously, without success.

"Watch yourself," chides Chuuya dryly.

Gogol's teeth remain bared but he stops struggling. If Dazai hadn't dealt with such people his entire life, the veil of serenity sweeping over Gogol's eyes would be startling. "I'll kill you," he says with a sigh, dreamily almost. "I'll slit your throats and watch you choke on your blood."

Chuuya dashes forward but stops when Dazai lifts his hand, signaling him to be lenient. For now.

"Kolya," Sigma says, staring at him until he returns the look. "It's okay. It'll be okay." For a moment, nothing happens. "Really. It's fine. If it's just information they want, they're going to get that either way. It's *okay."*

Gogol relaxes at last.

"Chuuya," Dazai says, gesturing towards Sigma.

Understanding right away, Chuuya squats down to Sigma's eye level and reaches out to touch her forehead. At the same time, Dazai whips out the gun in his pocket and presses it to Gogol's skull because –

Chuuya's expression turns dazed, then fuzzy, before he slumps forward into Sigma. It releases his grip on the pair but having anticipated that, Dazai winds an arm around Gogol's neck and lifts them off the ground as he presses the gun to the side of his head.

Sigma blinks, gaze sliding from Chuuya to Dazai.

"I'd advise you against any foolish acts of bravery," he says before nodding at one of the chairs. "Get him on one of those. Make sure he's comfortable."

It takes Sigma a few seconds to move, carrying the same air of hazy confusion as Chuuya did before he collapsed. Gogol forces out a ragged breath in Dazai's grip, fingers sliding around his wrist. Dazai responds with a chuckle. "See the security staff out on the balcony?" he murmurs. "Their gun is aimed at Sigma's head. Don't even bother."

"I'll kill you," Gogol breathes out. "I will."

"You won't be the first and the last one to try."

"I'll be the first one to succeed then."

"Kolya."

"I'm afraid that honor does not belong to you."

After Sigma has dragged Chuuya onto the chair, his head unconsciously lolling to the side, she turns to Dazai. "Your partner… who is he?"

Dazai tuts softly. "That's not how this works, lady. Be nice and maybe I'll share some information of my own later on."

"I don't know anything about that group, the Bishop's Staff, if that's what you're after."

"That wasn't the question."

Sigma lets out a sigh, eyes fluttering shut as her hand lifts to rub her temple. "I don't know much about the man you think is responsible either. I met him one time and never again. Your partner will tell you the same thing."

Even though the intel Dazai has been gathering said as much, this answer still makes him click his tongue in irritation. “You’re not part of his little club?”

“I told you. I don’t know anything about the Bishop’s Staff.”

Not this club. The other one. Much smaller, but arguably just as massive in scale and power.

Then again, a lot of things are different — not just in general but regarding Sigma’s history as well. If Dazai’s sources are to be trusted, then she met Gogol first — or at least that’s where she ended up after being found by pirates, captured, and eventually sold like a piece of used cattle. It’s not impossible that *The Decay of Angels never* came into being.

“Fine. When did you meet Dostoevsky then?”

Sigma’s eyes flicker past Dazai to Gogol. She swallows. “A year ago.”

Raising his brows, Dazai tilts his head. “*And?”*

“He just showed up, sat down next to me on a bench,” Sigma continues, shoulders lifting in a half-shrug. “And then he offered me a choice.”

Dazai can’t help but scoff. “A choice? That doesn’t sound like the man I know.”

“I didn’t know him then, still don’t, so I don’t care whether you think that sounds like him or not.”

“Fine. Go on.”

“He told me he could help me find out who I am. Where I came from… or what.” She shakes her head. “That there were things that I didn’t understand yet but that he could help me with. Or… I could continue living my life as it was. The casino. Our customers.” Her eyes find Gogol. “My partner.”

“And you chose to stay in the dark?”

“Of course I wanted to find out what happened to me!” Sigma snaps, taking a step forward and halting immediately. Taking a breath. “I still do. Do you think I enjoy wondering what my life used to be like before I woke up without any recollection of it one day? Do you think

it's fun to remember only four years of my life? I don't like being in the dark, but I also knew that if I had chosen the other option, I'd have lost everything. I know people like Dostoevsky. Like you. They *take*. And usually, they don't leave anything behind. I had made another, a new life for myself! That I liked! No way was I giving that up just because a stranger might have some answers! For all I knew, he might have been a con artist!"

A muffled groan behind her draws Dazai's attention to Chuuya. He pushes himself up in the chair and rubs his eyes.

"You're awake," Dazai says. "Wonderful. Now let's see if your answers match."

"She's telling the truth," Chuuya mutters before he gets to his feet and squints at Dazai. "It's not a lie."

"You were awake to hear that little speech?"

Chuuya grunts under his breath. "More or less. Dostoevsky only saw her once. Outside. In a park. He left after she chose the casino, but he also told her she could find him at some kind of church if she ever changed her mind." His gaze shifts to Sigma. "Why'd you leave that part out?"

Sigma scowls back at him. "If you went through such lengths to dig up information on him, I doubt you'll be able to find him at an address that he gave me *last spring*."

It's not entirely unreasonable, but…

"That's not your decision to make," Chuuya barks.

Yes.

"The address," Dazai sing-songs and wiggles the barrel of the gun against Gogol's temple to remind her that this isn't a podcast interview. "Now."

"Let them kill me, salataya," Gogol says. "I'll come back as a ghost and tear their throats out."

Chuuya shoots the man a scowl. "Ghosts don't exist, you stupid clown."

"Said every person ever before they got killed by a ghost."

Sigma lets out an irritated breath but gives in with a muttered, “all right, all right.” Her eyes keep darting to Gogol, making dumb faces at Chuuya when she walks around the desk.

Chuuya tears his gaze away from Dazai’s hostage to plant a hand on the tabletop. “No funny surprises.”

“There would be no use in fighting back now, would there?” Sigma mutters and then slides a piece of paper over the desk with an address scribbled on top of it. “I never went there to see it, but I googled it. It’s a church.”

Chuuya forces out a laugh, shaking his head.

Dazai agrees.

Surprising in its predictability.

The secret leader of the religious zealots living in a… church.

There is nothing that suggests they will find him there. A man like Dostoevsky is too brilliant to leave a clue this glaring behind.

And yet, an odd feeling in Dazai’s guts tells him that it is worth checking out. After all, Dostoevsky wants to be found, or he would have not revealed himself as he did through De Luca.

“Is that all?” Sigma says. “Will you leave my property now?”

“And you better be fast,” Gogol hums under his breath. “Because I’m motivated… and when I’m motivated, I am fast.”

“You're also out of your depth making silly threats,” Chuuya replies wryly, tossing a coin into the air and catching it with his fingers. “I can make this thing twice as heavy when I flick it at you — or a thousand times as heavy. Your choice.”

Gogol sighs deeply against Dazai. “Ne sschigay moye telo kogda ya umru. Ya wernus k tebye, moyo serdze.”

Don’t burn my body when I die. I will come back to you, my heart.

“Don’t be stupid,” Sigma hisses. “You’re not going anywhere, or I’ll be the one haunting them to the ends of the world.”

Dazai’s eyes twitch, exasperated by their dramatics, meeting Chuuya’s, equally annoyed. For a moment, both of them think the same thing.

For a single moment, they are alone in the room. Not Sigma, not Gogol, not the port mafia members, not even the muffled sounds of the crowd below them, cheering for blood and death and money. No one, but them.

Of course it cannot last forever.

Nothing ever does.

“Well,” Dazai says, breaking the silence in his head, “as much as I enjoy listening to your grand declarations… we are on a schedule here, so let’s wrap this up fast.” He turns his head to Sigma. “I would like to keep you as an ally.” Before Sigma can express all her objections, Dazai adds, “In return for your co-operation with Dostoevsky, *I* will help you find out where you came from. As long as you answer when I call and keep our relationship friendly, you won’t have to give any of this up. You’ll get to live your life as before *and* discover where you came from.”

Sigma crosses her arms in front of her chest, probably to gauge Dazai's intentions.

Gogol shakes his head. “Don’t do it, baby. Don’t make a deal with these devils.”

“Funny,” Chuuya says, pushing away from the desk to stroll to Gogol, tilting his head. “Aren’t you the one who has a criminal record of 89 deaths?”

Gogol snaps his teeth at him in response.

But all Chuuya does is lift his brows.

“You’ll be the 90th on my list.”

“I’d like to see you try.”

“And I’d like to feel the life fade out of your eyes…” Gogol gasps loudly. “Wait. I will!”

“You realize that saying it 10 times in a row won’t make it come true, yeah?”

“ALL RIGHT.” Putting two palms on both of their chests, Sigma slides in between them. “That is enough posturing for one day, don’t you think?”

Chuuya slides an unimpressed frown her way. Gogol, however, starts squirming, so that Dazai is forced to tighten his grip around his neck once again.

“Give us your answer and we’ll be out of your hair; easy peasy,” Dazai says.

Sigma meets his gaze head-on. Silent. And then: “Fine. *But* I won’t leave behind everything and run to answer you when you call. Either you will have me as an ally — an equal — or as an enemy. But I will not be yours to order around.”

“Tell them, baby,” Gogol mutters.

Dazai rolls his eyes before shooting a pointed look outside. “Do you think it’s wise to make demands when your precious casino is in the palm of my hand?” he traces the trigger of the gun with one fingertip. “The apple of your eye?”

“Do *you* think it’s wise to start another war?” Sigma rallies without so much as batting an eye. “From what I’ve seen, you’ve already got your hands full with one in your home country. Would be a shame to add to your plate.”

Next to him, Chuuya’s glare hardens.

“It would be more like a one-sided annihilation, and trust me, I have enough money and men to spare.”

Sigma shakes her head. “You disgust me. Treating your people like expendable subjects.”

Dazai blinks. Then he laughs, loud and genuine. “Are the people killing each other for money and entertainment not expendable to you then?”

“That's the fault of the country, making its people so hungry that they risk death for a shot at big money.” Her cheeks raise, daring Dazai to question her once more. “This casino just gives them the chance to do that.”

Chuuya is silently fuming next to her, an endless tide of irritation flowing from him. He wants to end this now so Sigma cannot regain any more ground. Even though it would be easier to leave two corpses behind — two fewer enemies — Dazai cannot ignore the casino owner's significance.

Dostoevsky left her a *choice.*

A choice.

Not only that, but he kept his promise.

Free will and choices are valuable currencies in this world that not everybody enjoys, much less from men like Dostoevsky.

In other words, Sigma plays an instrumental role for some reason. As a pawn or a weakness, it remains to be seen.

Dazai needs her alive. Ideally, in his pocket, so he can use her as his smoking gun when push comes to shove, but at this point, he would have to kill someone to get her to budge. Though he is not above doing that, he knows it will be more valuable to have her as an ally rather than just an uncooperative hostage.

Now the trick is to agree to her terms without letting her think that she has the upper hand.

“I will leave a team of my men here,” Dazai finally says. “You won’t have to run to answer my calls, but *they* will. The second, they stop reporting back to me, I will burn this place and every single person inside — excluding you, of course — to the ground. How does that sound?”

After a second of consideration, Sigma nods. “Your men are allowed to observe, nothing more.”

“Don’t worry. I’m not interested in running this place. They’ll be ambassadors, not governors.”

“Okay.” It’s only when Sigma receives her preferred outcome that her facade of determined bravery begins to break down. After blinking twice, she gulps, like she can't believe what she's done. *Cute.* “And you want to help me find my past…” She frowns. “What makes you think you can do that?”

“Because I’m going to catch Dostoevsky.” Dazai’s smile widens. “And then I'll expose all the secrets that have been rotting inside his head."

***

Two hours later, they are back on the Moby Dick, high above in the air where no one and nothing can touch them.

Dazai ended up knocking out Gogol — just so they would be able to leave without that rabid dog chasing after them — which nearly led Sigma to withdraw from the deal. He managed to make her see reason though, so now they have an address, an ally, and a new destination.

They also have *time*.

Depending on what they will find at that church Dostoevsky supposedly has been residing at some point, it will still take the port mafia an entire day, at best, and more than that, at worst, to come up with an impenetrable plan for a possible extraction.

That leaves Dazai with one other mission tonight.

One, who is currently sitting cross-legged on the couch of their living quarters, switching back and forth between staring out of the window at the endless sea of clouds and drinking the nth cup of coffee.

Dazai has been reading the reports for the last thirty minutes. For now, he leaves them behind on the counter and makes his way to the three-seater couch. “Colonel reports that we’ve conquered three more of their bases. We also have several hostages without any kill switches in their eyes now, and they’ve been chirping like birds.”

“Anything useful?” Chuuya asks, watching Dazai take a seat next to him without leaving much space between them.

“More locations. A few politicians they’ve got in their pockets. The kind of ploys they use to rope people into doing their bidding.”

“That’s good, right?”

Dazai tilts his face until they are looking at each other. Chuuya’s bloodshot eyes blink back at him, fluttering every few seconds like it’s taking him everything to keep them open. “Yeah. Sure.”

Chuuya is quiet for a heartbeat before asking, “What do you expect to find at the church?”

“More questions, probably,” Dazai says. “A trap or two. Maybe a portal to hell. Who knows. The man’s creative.”

Chuuya forces out a dry laugh, his gaze falling to his hands clutching a white mug. Even his posture, which is normally upright and confident, betrays his exhaustion. When he speaks, his voice is empty. “He’s a dead man walking.”

“Chuuya.” Maintaining eye contact, he gently grasps Chuuya's fingers. “I think that’s enough coffee.”

Chuuya instinctively tenses, refusing to let go of the mug. Dazai doesn’t push.

“We have time. You can rest now,” he murmurs. “It’s *enough.”*

He doesn't see anger or dismissal in Chuuya's eyes, chin trembling, his hands col and clammy. No, fear is the real culprit. He is terrified.

“I can’t.”

“You can,” Dazai says patiently.

“I don’t want to,” Chuuya whispers. “I don’t want to… I can’t – I can’t lose control. And when I’m asleep, I’m not in control. I can’t –”

Dazai finally steals the mug out of his grip and places it on the floor before he slides his fingers around Chuuya’s wrists and gently tugs at them. “You won’t lose control. I’ll be here the entire time.”

“You have better things to do than hold my fucking hand while I sleep.”

“*Sleep*, Chuuya. I’m not asking anymore.” That flies into Chuuya’s one ear and right out of the other, which means Dazai has no other choice but to resort to more drastic measures. The gentleness turns into a hard yank right into his chest — something that Chuuya isn’t very happy about. He grunts out an outraged noise and tries to escape, but Dazai doesn't let him. A hand around Chuuya's neck and another around his waist keep him trapped.

“I don’t want any *hugs* from you!”

Dazai ignores him, determined to win this battle of tenacity. With each attempt at slipping away, his grip on Chuuya grows progressively more tight.

“Let go of me, you deranged piece of shit, I –” Chuuya growls against him. “I hate you. You're the worst thing that's ever happened to me."

Dazai's eyes drift closed in the peaceful silence.

Chuuya curls his fingers in his shirt, harsh and cruel at first, before his fists begin to tremble silently. Another muffled hiss later, the man slowly lowers his forehead and stops resisting. His body sags against

Dazai, the tension evaporating until he all but surrenders to it.

“That's not so bad, is it?” he murmurs, running his fingers through Chuuya'shair.

Chuuya makes a disapproving noise. “It is. I hate…” He yawns. “… every second of it.” His leg shifts a bit. “And ‘s uncomfortable.”

That, he is right about.

So Dazai finds his thigh, pulls it over his hips, then lowers both of them to lie down. This time, Chuuya automatically wiggles closer, wrapping one hand around Dazai's neck and tucking his chin in.

“Better?” Dazai asks.

“…”

“Chuuya?”

“…”

Dazai pokes one cheek.

Chuuya’s already asleep though.

Chapter End Notes

Regarding Sigma: she's nonbinary but prefers to use she/her pronouns! :D

Next up we have:
- another sparring match (... and the chance to do something that they didn't get to do last time)
- physical comfort
- and a mouse trap

Chapter 29: The Surrender Tactic

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dazai's morning starts with a fist in his face.

"Ouch," he grumbles, rubbing his nose, which used to be effortlessly straight and now probably looks all crooked. "Chuuya couldn't even wait to –" He lifts his arm to block the next unprompted attack and reaches out with the other to aim for Chuuya's open spot on his neck, hoping that it will earn him the right to finish his sentence. No such luck. Dazai spins on his heel, and Chuuya ducks, both jogging in place as they face each other. "— to hear me out?" he finally manages to say.

Readjusting the gloves wrapped around his fingers, Chuuya rolls his eyes. "You begged me to train with you. That –"

"First of all, I do not beg."

" — means, we actually train. Not chat. And it's not like you had anything valuable to say anyway."

"Second of all, *rude."*

Even though Chuuya isn't wrong to claim that Dazai asked to be here, using the word *beg* is a gross overstatement. He is here — meaning the training area on the Moby Dick — because Chuuya spends all his time here whenever he is not out on a mission with Dazai or in bed… with Dazai, and neither of those settings makes for a practical opportunity to bring up sensitive conversations, like, for example, the thing that keeps Chuuya from sleeping on his own on most nights. This, an endless paradise of open space, padded floors, and a lot of means to work off all those dreadful human emotions, looked like a better place.

Chuuya has other things in mind though. All work, and no play.

"Then fight me about it," the man in question challenges with a provoking tilt of his head. "What are you waiting for, huh?"

Luckily, Dazai is a resourceful man. There are ways to make Chuuya talk, to make him listen, even when he is hellbent on trading blows.

“It seems to me that it’s you who is itching for a fight,” Dazai casually retorts as they circle each other. A pair of predators searching for an opening to strike.

Chuuya grunts a dry laugh. “You’re right. I am.”

Dazai sees his left-legged kick coming from a mile away — his signature move, so it’s easy to block it with one arm. Less easy is the force that propels Chuuya forward when he grasps that same arm and wrenches it back, drawing a pained hiss out of him. His other hand winds around Dazai’s neck, determined to get him to the ground come hell or high water. Except that right now, Chuuya is the hell and high water, and Dazai is getting swept up in him.

He gives in to Chuuya's grip, letting his body go slack. It forces Chuuya's body to react similarly, to relax, for just one second. But that one moment is all Dazai needs. As soon as Chuuya thinks that this is it, that he’s got him, Dazai focuses all his energy onto his upper body and reaches back to catch Chuuya by the waist and throw him to the ground.

Well, that is his goal anyway.

Someone like Chuuya doesn’t just get thrown though. He doesn’t fall to the ground either. He lands on both feet, as graceful and as lethal as a panther, and before Dazai even has the time to predict his next step, the world is already spinning. Back-first, he lands on the mat, the ceiling welcoming him with an unimpressed look. Children's anime would have birds circling over his head.

The adrenaline rush that propels him back to his feet is pleasant, however. Sometimes it's nice not to see things coming. Daunting too, but intense enough to stir the heat of the living inside him.

As soon as his vision is horizontal again, Dazai pounces on him. Chuuya's sharp smirk when his arm intercepts Dazai's fist is both approval and surprise. The next one is pure smugness. Chuuya's next blow hurts Dazai's face, but he's quick enough to take hold of his wrist, then the other, and wrestle his arms behind his back until Dazai has them pinned. Chuuya’s aggressive attempt to ram his elbow into Dazai’s wind-pipe fails. He only hits Dazai's shoulder and the air above it.

Though he wouldn't call ending up with his hands curled around Chuuya's arms and their faces hovering a breath apart a *failure*. Not even to this fight junkie.

They stare at each other, their breathing ragged and shallow, neither willing to move or break this fight. A drop of sweat rolls down Chuuya's temple as he raises his eyebrows and says, "Was that you actually putting effort into something a second ago, or am I seeing things?"

"You think I don't work hard?" he counters rather than providing an answer.

"Barely, yes."

"And here I was, working so hard to make port mafia thrive for the last two years."

"Being good at something and working hard aren't the same thing." Chuuya blows a strand of hair out of his eyes. "Don't act like you don't know that."

"You're right, but I work hard to please you, don't I?" Dazai's breath washes over Chuuya's neck in a low murmur. A satisfied smile spreads across his face as he watches the hair on Chuuya's nape stand up in response.

Chuuya's eyes flicker down to Dazai's mouth, then back up and the air becomes magnetic, pulling them towards each other. Almost tasting the salt on Chuuya's lips, he can imagine what it would be like to lick it off with his tongue, then force them open –

His chin jerks back when Chuuya slams the heel of his foot into Dazai's shin, then again and again until he locates a pressure point and breaks free from his hold. Chuuya moves inhumanely fast, even without his ability, hammering down on Dazai with blow after blow to every possible part of his body until he runs out of options and strength to block anymore, stuck in a hopeless defense position, and Chuuya's foot against his middle sends him to the ground with a breathless groan. And to make matters final, he follows Dazai to the floor, straddling him and pinning his arms to the ground.

"Figured I'd give you another taste." Chuuya's chest heaves with each breath, but his grin is as sharp as ever. "Since you liked it so much."

Dazai has to gulp for air before mustering a response. "How generous of you."

"Thank me later when we're done."

“Chuuya wants even *more*?” he groans.

Chuuya’s genuine look of distaste is a welcome sight — even if it comes at Dazai’s expense. “Obviously. We’ve barely even begun.”

“Why don’t you just kill me now,” Dazai mutters flatly before letting his head fall back against the mat.

The grip around his biceps softens. He feels Chuuya sit up, but not make any effort to get off him, which Dazai is glad for. He likes having Chuuya’s weight on top of him. It’s grounding in a way that most things in life fail to be. “Do you just pretend to be lazy or do you genuinely dislike this?”

Dazai’s eyes flutter open. He has to stifle an automatic response and think about the question. “I don’t dislike it any more than other activities.”

“But you don’t enjoy it?”

“It’s tiring, and energy is not something that I have unlimited access to.”

“Have you never fought so hard that you ended up forgetting that you’re tired?” Chuuya asks, blinking at him like he’s not sure that what he is saying makes any sense. “That everything — the pain, the exhaustion, the thoughts, the… emotions — all of it just goes away? The only thing on your mind being your next step?”

“When I say that it tires me out, I mean that it drains my body,” Dazai tells him. “I’ve pushed past the pain and physical exhaustion before but never past my brain.”

Chuuya's eyebrows tug into a puzzled frown. “You don’t?”

“Sure. How else would I know where to strike and when to block?”

“Instincts…?”

Dazai narrows one eye. Then he shrugs. “You have that maybe, being a little fight junkie and all, but *I* have to think about every step that I take. Considering I have to do that with nearly every other thing in my life as well, it can get a bit annoying to think so hard.”

“Huh.” Chuuya just sits there for a moment, staring off into nowhere as he processes that information. Then he shoots Dazai a look. “You’re

weird.”

“I’m *brilliant*,” Dazai says.

“And weird,” Chuuya insists, tongue darting out to swipe over his bottom lip as he shifts in his seat — Dazai’s waist and half of his groin, letting more of his weight settle before he inches forward until their faces are mere centimeters apart. “So what makes you *not* think?”

Dazai takes his sweet time to answer, dragging his eyes over every freckle, beauty mark, and line of that handsome face first. By the time they make their way back to Chuuya’s, an impatient scowl is staring back at him. “I don’t know,” Dazai says with an innocent hum. “You exhausted my head too much to reply to that question.”

“You…” Chuuya bites his lip before finishing his sentence — or, the insult that was sure to spill from it. “You need me to jog your memory then, huh?”

“That depends on what you want me to remember.”

The unimpressed pretense lasts for another few seconds before transforming into something more heated and charged. Chuuya holds his gaze, even as he inches forward and hovers his mouth over Dazai’s. His eyes do flicker to his lips, wetting his own, but end up on Dazai’s eyes again, looking at Dazai when his brows rise.

And, well, what is there to say?

No?

No way.

Dazai answers by tilting his head up, making the space between them that much smaller.

It is enough.

Chuuya plants his palms on each side of Dazai’s face and kisses him.

It’s quick, light enough to be almost ticklish, and when it’s over, Dazai gives him the best impression of a deadpan stare.

“Not helpful?”

“No, I was not only able to think but also think about how unhelpful it

is.”

“Pity,” Chuuya murmurs, though he doesn’t sound sad about it at all. “Let me try again.”

This one is slower; their lips linger, but when Dazai lifts his arm to grab Chuuya’s neck and wrench him down, his arm quickly gets pinned to the mat.

“You said you were too tired to move, so be a good boy and *act* like it.”

“Do you think that just because I feed your praise kink whenever I need to, I have one of my own?” Dazai asks dryly and lets his head loll to the side.

Chuuya’s fingers tighten around him. “You don’t need to do anything for me.”

“So you keep telling me, and yet you insist on doing the opposite for me. Let's not waste any time and admit that we both need each other to survive.”

The answer is a forced exhale. Chuuya doesn’t argue against it though which means as much as a verbal *okay*. Then, he slots their mouths back together again and gives them both what they crave: hard, messy, and filthy, their lips chasing each other like ravenous beasts that have smelt blood — more of a hunt than a dance.

Even though Dazai could spend days, weeks, months, just exploring every single inch of Chuuya’s warm mouth, get drunk on his taste and the sounds he makes until he is sick of it, the way Chuuya’s body melts against him is what turns the complicated systems of a hundred frequencies in his head into one: echoing the feeling of their hearts beating together.

It's not that he stops thinking. He has only been fortunate enough to accomplish that a few times in his life. It’s just that everything else gets a little quieter as his focus zeroes in on the sensation of Chuuya’s skin. Hard but liquid, soft but rough, warming up all the cold places and blowing cool air onto his overheating head.

And just when he starts to feel even more of it, the ceiling above them rumbles, breaking them apart, before an automatic voice from the speakers announces their arrival at their destination.

Chuuya rolls off him and sighs against the mat.

Dazai scrubs a hand over his face, making the mistake of glancing up and seeing that they have had an audience this entire time.

“Kouyou-san,” he calls with a jerk of his chin towards the balcony where the woman has been watching them from. Her mouth forms a perfect smile, but Dazai has spent too much time with her not to recognize the shadow of disapproval lurking behind it. “I didn't know you were into voyeurism. I’d have given you a show much sooner.”

Next to him, Chuuya stiffens.

“If I had such tastes, I would not seek them out from you,” she says, voice somehow still sharp even from high above. “I came to inform you that we have arrived, boss. Seeing as you were *occupied*,” she clears her throat, “I chose to wait until you were done.”

“Are you sure you have no such tastes? Could have fooled me,” he mutters, the last part under his breath. “We will be right there.”

Dazai sits up and dusts himself off after Kouyou leaves the training level. When Chuuya’s still pretending to be a corpse even minutes later, he pokes his arm. “Come on. We have a war to plan.”

Chuuya shakes his head, his eyes remaining fixed on the ground.

“Kouyou has seen worse than this. It’s not a big deal.”

“To you maybe,” he mutters. “But I –“ He stops and tries again. “I…”

When Chuuya raises his eyes to him, Dazai tilts his head.

“… nevermind. It doesn’t matter whether people think I slept my way up, does it.” Even though it looks and smells like a question, it doesn’t sound like one. Chuuya climbs to his feet with a sigh, not waiting for Dazai to follow as he makes for the exit.

“Speaking of training,” Dazai starts after he catches up.

“We weren’t speaking of it.”

“But we were *doing* it — and speaking of, have you ever considered training that…” He smacks his lips, wondering how to best put that delicate topic into words. “… other power of yours?”

Chuuya visibly tenses, though he forces himself to keep moving. “Do

you want to use it as a weapon?"

"Not right now. I was thinking of –"

"Then no."

"You don't even want to consider it?"

"You asked. I answered."

"You also told me you would do whatever it takes. Is that no longer true?"

Chuuya's lips purse, nostrils flaring as he blows out a breath. "Of course it stands."

"Then *think* about it."

Recently, Dazai has learned that Chuuya needs to be pushed hard in certain areas of his life if he is to function at all. Drinking, resting, coming, breathing. There are things that he needs to be coaxed into with a soft pair of arms and an understanding voice, like, his duty as Dazai's bodyguard, his job as a soldier, a weapon, and an executive. Then there are the sensitive cases in between that can either explode or implode when they are pushed too hard or too gently.

Things like Arahabaki. Like the sheep. Like Yuan.

"Fine," Chuuya says, his voice flat and quiet before he stops abruptly in his tracks.

A quick investigation pinpoints the tension's source.

There is a bright flash of pink at the end of the hall.

Yuan.

She has shorter hair now, and her mafia suit has been replaced by an all-black shirt and jeans combo that is topped off by a leather over-coat.

Dazai places a hand on Chuuya's back. There is only one way through this passage and it's forward. Turning around to run in the other direction isn't an option. Not for him. Chuuya's muscles are as stiff as a board, but he eventually moves again.

Yuan tilts her head, eyes lifting and landing on Chuuya.

Chuuya keeps going.

Dazai watches everything from the corner of his eye, fascinated by the sudden shift in the air even though nothing is said. Not when they approach Yuan, who is talking to Albatross. Not when they pass her. Not when they leave her behind.

But Dazai can feel her gaze on their backs — or Chuuya's — right up until the very end of the hallway before they round the corner.

Chuuya stares into the distance, his gaze vacant. If the plane suddenly had no walls to keep them safely inside, he would probably walk right off the edge without even noticing he is about to fall to his death.

"We still have time," Dazai eventually tells him. "You could talk to her."

Chuuya says nothing.

That is all right though. Dazai has no plans to force him to talk. After all, it would not be fair to demand things from Chuuya that Dazai would refuse to do either.

Their destination is, first, their living quarters, then the board room where they, along with two other executives and their highest-ranking team members are meeting to discuss the intel that has been gathered on Dostoevsky's location and their extraction strategy for him. After they have both changed out of their training gear and into formal clothes, Chuuya holds onto his discarded pair of sweatpants in his hands.

"You go ahead," he says without really looking at Dazai. "I'll catch up."

Dazai scans his face, brows furrowed. He would rather be there if Chuuya… is experiencing *emotions*, whether he needs someone to keep him standing or just something to punch. "Are you sure?" The silver clasp on Chuuya's choker isn't in its right place, so Dazai lifts his fingers and slides it back to where it belongs. "They can wait a few more minutes."

Chuuya's gaze flickers to him. He shakes his head. "It's fine."

"Okay." And after he turns to leave, Dazai halts at the threshold. "I'll reserve a seat for you next to me."

***

The board room is already bustling with activity when Dazai enters. The executives, Kouyou and Piano Man, and their subordinates halt in their tracks to welcome him with respectful bows but his eyes are already glued to the media screen, playing a live feed of the chapel, and right there, lighting a candle, is Fyodor Dostoevsky.

He looks different from the last time Dazai saw him.

Not because of any physical factors. His hair still falls over his shoulders, dark, straight, and greasy. Still the same long white fur coat and an ushanka — although he seems to have at least grown into that cloak of his. And still that same subtle smile, the one that makes him look like he is on a secret with the world that the rest of humanity doesn't know about.

Most likely because he is.

Why else would he hide in plain sight?

Piano Man uh-uhs like he is able to read Dazai's thoughts. "He's diligently been visiting the church twice a day ever since we scoured the location, and has done so for the last… ten years as well."

"Ten years?" Dazai asks. "That's impossible."

"Well, he missed two weeks in 2014. Another one in 2016, and six months in 2018 — get this — because he spent them abroad in Yokohama as part of his college program."

College program?

Dazai inhales slowly, then takes a seat at the head of the table. Everyone else in the room, aside from Piano Man who remains on his feet, follows suit. There is one medium-sized file in the center that Dazai grabs before he says, "Start at the beginning."

"Very well, boss." Piano Man pushes a button on the remote in his hand and another picture appears on the media screen: a regular government-issued ID of Dostoevsky. "Rodion Raskolnikov. On November 11th, 1991, he was born in Zelenograd, UDSSR - now the Russian Federation. Upon his birth, he was abandoned in the hospital. The name of the woman that checked into the emergency room was false, so any family is out of the picture. He was taken in by an orthodox church community and remained there until he was 18 and

attended his local town college to study law. He spent six months living in Yokohama in 2014, visited Japan again last December, graduated two years ago with a Juris Doctor degree and now works as a…" Piano Man clears his throat. "… defense attorney in a non-profit organization in Moscow. His apartment says as much: one bedroom, terrible neighborhood with b a crime rate of 51%."

The folder contains the same information, just with the bonus of all the certificates, including his medical history. No criminal records because he hasn't committed anything. Of course. He is squeaky clean.

"What about friends? Co-workers? Significant others?" Dazai wants to know.

"He has been living a rather celibate lifestyle."

On the other side of the room, the door opens and Chuuya quietly slips inside. His eyes immediately flicker to the pictures on the wall, then lower as he makes his way to the seat next to Dazai and Kouyou, whose gaze sharpens ever so slightly.

"As for friends: we're looking at a handful of people here." The images change again, showing a bunch of IDs of other people, as well as a group picture with Dostoevsky in it — or whatever alias he uses now. "My people report that his friends and co-workers all have nothing but nice things to say about him. Due to work responsibilities, he doesn't go out as often as he used to anymore, but they are all still in contact with him. Mostly phone calls and bar nights every other week."

"We'll make use of them later," Dazai says.

Piano Man nods. "Aside from that, there is not much else there. His browser history is clean. With the exception of anemia, he is physically fit. Had an appendectomy when he was 12. Got his wisdom teeth removed when he was 14. Yearly checkups with his general practitioner.

"We've set up live feeds of the church, nearby streets, his apartment, and his workplace. He won't go anywhere without us knowing."

The room grows quiet after the presentation.

Chuuya touches the edge of the folder, drawing it to him to get a look.

"Well," Dazai says into the silence, "that is a load of bullshit."

Piano Man nods in agreement. “This is either a very extensive alias or Dostoevsky is his real name. It's just a matter of extracting him now.”

“Isn't it worth considering to observe only for the time being?” Kouyou interjects.

Dazai shakes his head. “He won’t reveal anything like that. The best course of action is to capture him.”

“And the girl, Sigma, did not tell him?”

“The team we left behind in the casino keeps a close eye on her. Besides, Kouyou-san,” Dazai drags his eyes to her and offers her a molten smile, “nothing in life is ever certain. We just have to make do with what we have.”

“Don’t misunderstand me, boss, but this feels like a grand set-up.”

A 25-year-old, innocent defense attorney who goes to church twice a day and is loved by his community.

Dazai exhales. “It is. That’s why we will control every single way out of this that there is. Prepare a hundred contingency plans for every ten of his."

They start organizing after that.

The main risk that they are facing is that there will be some kind of explosives or another deadly surprise waiting for them, so Dazai creates a task force to scour the location for anything even remotely dangerous. The same task force is also responsible for evacuating the residents in the vicinity, so that if push comes to shove, Dazai and his dreadful terrorist activities won't be uncovered, not least on foreign soil, as this would result in serious and unwanted political consequences that even the port mafia would have difficulty coping with. Kouyou's five most gifted girls, which now includes Yuan, will secure Dostoevsky's closest friends as hostages. Though Dazai doubts a man without heart would respond to such blackmail, he refuses to dismiss the possibility.

In terms of the extraction itself, they choose the church because it is more deserted than his apartment and workplace. Dostoevsky visits it every day at 5 AM and every evening at 7 PM. Like clockwork. That fact alone should already alert people of his guilt. Then again it's the devil's way of doing things: right under everyone's nose.

Developing an attack strategy takes even more time, more heated discussions that drag on over the entire length of the day, along with more cups of coffee than Dazai ever wanted to consume in his life. His people seem to feel the same way, judging by the tired glaze on their faces when they finally call it a day.

As everyone gathers their things to leave, Dazai remains firmly in his seat. There is still a lot to do for him here. Though his firm determination to spend at least a few more hours considering all possibilities wanes when he sees Kouyou stall for time with that look on her face, the one that she gave him before lecturing on something back when he was a teenager.

We discussed this. You cannot just take over my interrogation, lad.

Osamu, has your father had a talk with you about using protection?

You are a flower that blooms in the darkness, Dazai. Do not let the tempting color of the daylight deceive you.

Chuuya, who has been busy glaring at the folder again, shoots Dazai a wordless question in the form of a look when he notices Kouyou's refusal to leave. Dazai answers with a glance of his own.

He may or may not regret sending Chuuya away when Kouyou watches him leave, then turns expectantly to Dazai. "You two have become close."

"Is that an observation or an accusation?" he counters.

"In this business, it is always more than just an observation, boss." Even though she says his title, always does, it still sounds like an unspoken *lad* right now. "You have to be careful. Now more than ever, the entire organization's eyes are on you. Let them see too much of Nakahara-kun by your side and –"

"And *what?"* Turning his body to her, Dazai flashes her a cold smile. "The organization will turn against me, is that what you are trying to say here, hm?"

In other words, it's a silent: *I dare you.*

But Kouyou wouldn't have climbed such a high rank if that would manage to rattle her picture-perfect composure. Unfortunately. "I am not here to threaten you. I am not the Colonel or Ace. You and I both know I am *better* than that."

“So I thought, Ane-san, but I’m starting to think all that time you spend torturing people is finally starting to get to you.”

“Be reasonable,” she hisses, leaning forward with the piercing stare of a black widow. “Taking the sheep boy to bed is one thing. Making him an executive, letting him sit by your side like he is your underboss, and sharing your plans with him and him only is an entirely different picture that you are painting; and doing both…” Her little outburst tapers out as quickly as it came. Straightening her spine, Kouyou folds her hands together. "You are putting yourself as well as him at risk. Questions are already being raised. While the Colonel may be the loudest, he is not the only one."

“Be a treasure and take care of them then. You’re good at that, no?”

Kouyou stares back at him, defiant in her silence.

Dazai tilts his head. “Unless you are one of those voices?”

“I told you, boss. I am not here to threaten you but to advise. Something that every boss before and every boss after you made use of, may I add. With reason.”

“Ah, I see,” Dazai murmurs, driving his fingertips over the desk and smiling to himself. “You want a new position.” Then he looks at her. “Applying to be my new advisor, huh?”

She returns his gaze without flinching. “You need one. I am the best.”

“I do not need anything, and I already have an advisor.”

“You haven’t let Hirotsu-san do his job in months. You are leading us into a war completely on your own. Surely you can see how that cannot bode well.”

That is not a lie. Tsushima Gen’emon, Dazai’s father, had an advisor named Takeo Uchida who was quickly disposed of after the old man’s death. Mori gave that job to Hirotsu, and Dazai adopted him into his new regime as well. Don’t get him wrong, the elderly man was a valuable ear to turn to in the first few months, but there came a time when their ideas of the port mafia’s future started taking two different paths. Dazai never bothered to replace that post as it didn’t matter who would stand there, whispering advice into his ear and doing all his dirty work if necessary.

There is no way any of them would understand where Dazai is leading

them.

None of them could.

Hirotsu couldn't, and neither will Kouyou.

But.

"Fine," Dazai decides flippantly, flicking his fingers. "You're hired. Advise away. But you're only starting tomorrow."

Denying Kouyou would not only create more problems, but may even result in an adversary, which would cause phase two to be delayed. Dazai will not let that happen. With someone behind him questioning his every move, trying to put strings on him, and playing the puppet master, it will be more challenging to bulldoze straight ahead — which is what advisors often do. But not impossible. In any case, this problem is temporary.

After phase three has been completed, it will not matter.

Kouyou's eyes narrow as she attempts to find the catch in his cooperation. Her chin lifts when she finds nothing. "Very well. I will see you in the morning, boss. Get some rest."

"Kouyou dear," Dazai calls out before she can open the door.

"Yes?" she says, looking over her shoulder.

"Your job is to counsel me on port mafia matters only. You stay out of everything else. Is that clear?"

A moment passes. Then she dips her head. "Yes, boss. That is clear."

***

Two hours and forty-nine minutes later, Dazai is still here. He has switched to another place at the table with the hope of sparking his creativity by changing the setting, inhaled three lines of his finest product, and reread the same fifteen pages of information twenty times, but to no avail.

"What is your play here?" Dazai murmurs to himself as he stares at the live feed on the wall. Dostoevsky has just come home from church and is now cooking dinner. Something with rice and meat and a lot of carrots. Chop, chop, chop –

Then his eyes flicker up, gazing right at the camera like he knows *exactly* who put it there and is now sitting behind the screen. The corner of his mouth lifts into a dreadful half-smirk.

Dazai's breath practically freezes as he stares back at him, waiting for –

Snap.

His eyes flicker down. One half of the pencil, that was still whole just now, rolls over the desk.

When he glances back up, Dostoevsky's back is turned to the screen again. He stirs the pot on his stove. He adds a pinch of salt and pepper. He steals a piece of carrot and puts it into his mouth.

It goes on like that for another half an hour. When Dostoevsky takes out a plate for himself, the door of the board room opens. Dazai's facing away from it, but he recognizes the scent, gun powder, sunshine, and smoke, knows it too well by now.

"Anything newsworthy happen?" Chuuya asks, planting his bum against the edge of the desk.

Dazai twirls the chair around, rests his cheek in his palm, and looks at him. "He is eating *Plov."*

Chuuya's lashes flutter. "Hah?"

"Plov," Dazai starts, "it's a Russian dish. Rice pilaf. With lamb — or beef or pork, you decide — and carrots."

Frowning, Chuuya tears his eyes away from him to glance at the screen. As if Dazai would lie about something as banal as that. "I meant things that are of significance to us," he says, turning back to Dazai. "Not what he's having for dinner."

"Well, it's the only thing that's happened. He went to church, prayed for the end of the world, then came home and made Plov." Dazai's eyes fall shut as he sighs against his hand. "That's it."

"Do you think he knows he's being watched?"

"I'm sure he does."

"But Sigma didn't betray us?"

Yawning, Dazai shakes his head. “A devil like that has other ways. For all we know, he *wants* us to watch him.”

To catch him.

There might be a trojan horse at work here.

Though for that to work, Dazai would have to not know who Dostoevsky is, and he *does*.

Several moments pass. He feels the heavy weight of Chuuya’s gaze on his face, so he opens his eyes again and blinks, feeling more tired than usual. “Ask.”

“What makes you so sure it’s him? That he’s the one behind *the Bishop’s Staff?”*

Answering that question is a dangerous path to walk on, risking exposing things that Chuuya couldn’t possibly understand just yet. But unlike Kouyou, Dazai cannot – he will not placate him with empty promises. Not Chuuya.

“Remember when I told you I’ve already been to Russia?”

A nod.

“Well, during one of my visits, I met him.” Dazai jerks his head towards the screen. “Only that he introduced himself as Dostoevsky, not Raskolnikov.”

Chuuya processes that piece of information. Then sits down more firmly on the desk and folds his arms. “Okay. What happened between you two?”

“I had run away from the port mafia and my father, so I was looking for… something to do. A purpose, if you will. And I ended up in Russia. Dostoevsky was looking for something else as well. A book.”

“A book?” Chuuya echoes flatly.

“*The* book,” Dazai says, trying to see if that says something to him.

“Yeah, I heard you the first time. What kind of book?”

A sigh escapes Dazai's chest before he leans back in his chair. “A special one. It’s empty, and whatever you write into it becomes true.”

“Wait, *that* book? I thought it was just a folktale that people used to tell each other to make themselves feel better.”

“So you have heard of it.”

Chuuya rolls his eyes. “Who hasn’t? Magic book with magic pages. They’ve even written a manga about it, Dazai.”

Dazai blinks.

“Death note?”

“That’s… not the same. The book doesn’t kill people. He has the wits to avoid saying something stupid. “It makes things come true instead of just killing people. How would you know about it anyway?” He narrows his eyes. “Have you been lying about not being able to read this entire time?”

“Fuck you, I could still look at the pictures,” Chuuya mutters with a puff of breath and kicks Dazai’s knee. “The sheep –” And just like that, just by saying these two words, that grumpy frown of his darkens again, makes him look ten times heavier as he sits there, mouth half-open like he suddenly remembered what happened to them all over again.

Dazai catches his foot and uses it to roll his chair closer to the desk and Chuuya. That drags him out of his trance, eyes fluttering to the hand that Dazai places on his knee.

“If you only ever looked at the drawings, then how do you know what the story was about?”

“It was a popular manga,” Chuuya finally says, shrugging weakly. “Even on the streets.”

“Well, whatever the case may be, that book and that piece of fiction are not the same. Partly because it makes everything come true, as long as the writing follows a set of rules, and… because it exists.”

Chuuya’s thigh stops bouncing. “What?”

Tracing the seam line of his slacks with one fingertip, Dazai hums. “Yup.”

“Are you serious? That fairy tale has been real this entire time?”

“But of course. If abilities… and singularities and dragons exist, then

why should the book not be real?"

"Because," Chuuya says. "Everything has its limits, and you don't *know* if dragons exist. The egg might just be an egg. Nothing more and nothing less than that. But the book — that kind of thing could topple *countries*."

Ever since Chuuya first gave the dragon egg the name Kafka, he's referred to it as that too. *Kafka*. It's strange to hear him call it what it is.

Dazai frowns, already forgotten what they were talking about before it comes back to him. Right. The book.

"Well, there is a reason why it's so hard to find, and you just named it."

"How do you know it's real? And what did Dostoevsky want with it?"

"Careful, Chuuya. I might just start demanding payment from you if you continue to drill me with so many questions."

"Do it then," he says. "There is nothing I won't give you."

Dazai's mouth draws into a thin line. It is much less fun to play this game without any pushback. Much more depressing too.

"Dostoevsky's wish was to eradicate the existence of abilities from this world," he says instead. "*Sins.* That's what he called them. It is the same thing that De Luca told you. Put two and two together and…" He shrugs. "Dostoevsky's name was the sum."

"He just told you that?"

"I'm giving you the short version. It took me weeks to get anything useful out of him, but eventually, I convinced him that we wanted the same thing. My ability helped a lot."

Chuuya's skeptical frown softens but doesn't go away entirely. "Then what?"

"Then he tried to have me killed, I didn't let him, and we parted ways."

"Why did he want to kill you?"

Dazai shoots him a flat look.

Chuuya understands at once. “So he didn’t want you to reveal his intentions to anyone, you left and… went back to Yokohama?”

Dazai confirms his guess with a nod.

“And you didn’t care about his plans?”

“I didn’t believe that the book was real either. Why would I? It sounded like fiction. And fourteen-year-old Dazai wasn’t exactly…” He makes a face. “… interested in the well-being of his surroundings.”

“But you know that it’s real now. How do you…” Chuuya trails off, and Dazai can see the wheels in his head turning, drawing conclusions, and answering questions he hasn't even asked yet. “You found it, didn’t you?”

Dazai glances at the screen where Dostoevsky has moved on to doing the dishes. Such a dutiful, little villain. “Does it matter? It’s hidden away. No one will get their hands on it, especially not Dostoevsky.”

“Sure it does,” he hears Chuuya mutter. “You found a book that can make all of your wishes come true. That *matters*. It could –” The hitch in his breath makes Dazai look at him again. “It could do things. Things that would otherwise be impossible, *right?”*

Dazai has to smile. It’s a sad smile. “The book can’t bring people back from the dead, Chuuya.”

“Why not?” Chuuya asks. “You said it creates *anything* that –”

“I also said it follows a fixed set of *rules.* What you write has to make sense. Some kind of basis is necessary. Bringing people back from the dead is illogical.”

“But rewriting the past *does*.”

Dazai gazes at him. Silent.

“Doesn’t it?” Chuuya urges.

“No. No, it doesn’t.” Dazai rolls away from the desk, from Chuuya, and turns the other way. “Time is fixed. You cannot change what has already happened.”

“That’s –” He hears Chuuya inhale sharply. The pain in his voice when he says, “That’s bullshit.”

The screen shows Dostoevsky drying his hands with a crimson towel.

“That book sounds like a bunch of crap.”

“Yeah,” Dazai says quietly. “It does, doesn’t it?”

They are silent for a while. The seconds turn into minutes and the minutes turn into nothing until Chuuya’s feet hit the floor and he walks towards Dazai, watching Dostoevsky respond to his e-mails.

“He won’t do anything,” Chuuya says and places a tentative hand on his shoulder. Squeezing. “You should get some rest.”

Dazai could tell him the same thing he told Kouyou earlier. Or he could bring up the fact that Chuuya has no right lecturing him about *rest* when he has been just as bad — though slightly less bad since Dazai practically forced him to sleep on the couch.

He could, but for some reason, he does not want to.

For some reason, the thought of sleep, and maybe Chuuya, sends a pleasant rush of warmth through his chest.

For some reason, it makes Dazai tilt his head and rests his cheek on the hand on his shoulder, humming under his breath. “I’m so tired that I’m…” He has to yawn again. “... starting to suspect I have developed a… rather inconvenient tolerance to my drugs.”

“I know that I’m — ” Chuuya’s fingers tighten subconsciously against his skin when he clears his throat. “ — not the best person to speak about this but –”

“You aren’t,” Dazai agrees.

“ — maybe that’s not such a bad thing.”

“In fact, the last person who should talk about it is you. You’re so much meaner about it too.”

“Dazai.”

It’s the tone that makes Dazai pause and listen instead of filling the silence with gripes and accusations they have already exchanged a thousand times. “Hm?”

“Come to bed.”

And that…

That sounds like a plea.

And not just for Dazai's sake either.

Chuuya makes an unhappy noise when he doesn't receive an immediate reply. "Just get up and go to bed already," he mutters. "With me."

Dazai savors his flustered in- and exhale for another blissful moment before he lets out a belly-deep sigh and lets the rest of his body slump against Chuuya too. "If you're asking so nicely… but you will have to carry me. Ahhh!" He yawns again, genuinely. "I am too tired to walk… Your training earlier is to blame for that."

"I'm not going to *carry* you."

"Why not?"

"Because."

"I thought you were supposed to be strong."

"I am. I still don't want to carry you."

"I carried you to bed once. Why won't you do the same for me?"

"Hah? Stop lying."

"I'm not."

"You are."

"Cross my heart and hope to die, I am not. I would never lie to you, Chuuya."

"You lie to me all the time."

"No, I don't, and I did. You passed out in the bathtub, that night you got hammered in the bar, remember? You fell asleep and I had to carry you to bed like a princess."

"Shut up."

"Now it's your turn to carry me like a princess."

“I’m not going to carry you like a princess to your damn bedroom where everyone can see us.”

Chuuya is probably right. The last thing Dazai should do after Kouyou’s warnings is let his people be witness to *that*, but…

The heart wants what it wants, right?

“It sounds like you will carry me like a princess where no one can see us,” he says and finally blinks one eye open. Chuuya’s disgruntled scowl is even prettier than in his head. “Say yes, or I will make you carry me like a –”

“Yes, okay! Now get your ass up!”

“I would if Chuuya helped me…”

Grunting, he pulls Dazai from the chair and to his feet with their hands entwined. It makes him stumble against Chuuya, and since they are already so close, he goes ahead and uses the top of Chuuya’s skull as his headrest.

“What are you –” Chuuya’s complaint bleeds into a startled noise when Dazai slips his arms under his and slides them around his chest before pulling him back against him. Tight.

He can only smile at all that tension keeping Chuuya’s muscles stiff and frozen. Trust Chuuya to have no qualms about stripping in front of him and letting him see him stark-naked but freak over a mere hug.

Dazai is no monster though. Not Chuuya’s, anyway. “The least you can do is be my headrest after refusing to carry *your boss* to bed.”

“The least…” Chuuya trails off and puffs out a breath of air. “I hate you.”

His muscles begin to soften. He sighs, and relaxes against him.

Dazai drinks in the comfort of their bodies pressed together, of having someone to cling to, someone to lean against. He had never truly understood what it meant to be lonely before Chuuya marched down that aisle like he was marching into battle.

Only then — after he had experienced being buried in someone else's warmth, doing his paperwork while Chuuya was asking him questions, walking the endless halls of port mafia and pausing because someone

else is right beside him-did he finally grasp the concept of loneliness.

That it is more than simply being alone; it is the absence of an essential part of yourself. Like missing one of two lungs.

Eventually, Dazai's eyes flutter open and to the screen.

Dostoevsky shuts his laptop and gets to his feet.

And just for a second, Dazai wonders.

What would happen if he rewrote the script that has determined his life for the past five years?

When Chuuya, at some point, says, "C'mon… we have to go", he sounds just as convinced of that as Dazai which is: not at all.

Dazai shakes his head and hums a little. They do not have to do anything.

Chuuya sighs and, for once, it's not a you-are-driving-me-insane kind of sigh but a quiet, peaceful one, especially as even more tension begins to seep out of his body.

What does eventually force them to move is the muffled noise outside the door. As they live in a closer space than before, they have a cleaning staff on board to keep everything clean. Right about now would be the turn of this particular conference room.

Kouyou's words replay in Dazai's head, giving him the necessary push to pull away from his little husband's heat and embrace the cold and empty air instead. Chuuya glances over his shoulder, confused, like he doesn't understand why Dazai is stopping, a far way from the grumpy glare he must have worn when he was still struggling against the hug — though just as fleeting.

His expression shutters closed a moment later and drags his feet towards the door. Dazai grabs his phone and a few hand-written notes that he made earlier before following him.

A steady hum echoes through the dim hallways.

Dazai stops at one of the windows to take a look outside and remind his mind and body that they are thousands of kilometers up in the air. There is nothing like a shot of adrenaline to spark his creativity.

His stomach does flip, but instead of making Dazai any smarter about

what Dostoevsky is up to, it makes him stupider — stupid enough to inch closer to Chuuya so that he can hold onto him in case the floor gives in under him. As if *that* would save him from falling. Dazai's ability would ensure he would hit the ground.

There are technically two bedrooms in Dazai's living quarters, and a comfortable, spacious couch inside the room where he sleeps. Chuuya has tried neither of them so far, and tonight is no different.

They shuffle into the room side by side, hips bumping against each other occasionally. Usually, Chuuya heads straight for the shower whether it's early in the morning, after a work-out, a mission, the outside, or before bed. He spends so much time showering that Dazai once made a joke that he is trying to be a plant — watering himself to grow tall enough to touch the sun. Needless to say, Chuuya was not amused to hear that.

His eyes fix on Chuuya as he strips down to his underwear, the inked wings on his shoulders flexing over his muscles; Dazai is so engrossed by the view that the fact that Chuuya slips under the covers rather than underwater catches him by surprise. Dazai undresses faster.

Exhaustion has been unkind to him lately, a persistent and invasive parasite that refuses to leave his mind and body no matter how many over-the-counter drugs he takes to battle it. Or, maybe it is *because* of that. Dazai has not had time to examine it further; he just knows that his eyes are fluttering shut every few seconds without his permission, and it is becoming a problem. His body cannot fail him in the middle of a war — so close to the final phase of his plan.

His body cannot fail him just yet. It has to hold out for at least a few more months.

He leaves on most of his bandages, and crawls under the covers.The sheets rustle. A moment later, Chuuya rolls over, only the faint outline of his stricken expression visible in the darkness of the room.

"Do you think Yuan will be okay?"

Dazai pushes the fog of sleep in his mind away for another moment or so, clinging to consciousness like a man dangling from the edge of a cliff one-handedly. "Albatross said she has been training a lot. "Kouyou wouldn't send her on this mission if she didn't believe she was capable."

"What if she's wrong?"

It’s not a stupid question — they have all been wrong before; Dazai certainly has been — but it’s nonetheless a useless one.

“Then Kouyou is wrong and Yuan won’t be okay.”

Chuuya's throat bobs; his fingers tremble as they curl around the pillow. Dazai waits for a heartbeat before he covers them with his hand. This is not an assurance. It's not even a kindness. It's just a means to an end: Chuuya wants to sleep without worrying about losing control, and Dazai sleeps better knowing Chuuya does too. It only makes sense to slip the other hand around Chuuya's back, both to draw him closer and to keep his fingers from slipping away.

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“Two minutes out, boss!”

Dazai acknowledges the information with a nod, glancing at Chuuya, then at Oe Nami — both are dressed in the same tactical gear as him — before he adjusts his throat mic. “Armageddon will begin in two and a half minutes. One, two, three – mark.”

There is an echo of “yes, boss” and “roger that” on the line.

“I feel like I’m out of the loop again,” Nami says, giving Dazai a once-over. “Are you the boss or not?”

“The only thing you need to know is how to shut up and do your job,” Chuuya tells her without so much as batting an eye.

Nami’s lips twist into a false pout. “Hey, there’s no need to be so mean about it. Or,” she coughs into her fist, “so territorial. The least you can do is answer my questions if I’m supposed to catch the big bad for you.”

Chuuya hisses out a breath. “Catching? For us? You’re just here because your ability happens to be useful *and* because your brother begged us to take you in so you wouldn’t get killed on the streets!”

However, Nami nods like he has just confirmed her claim. “Exactly. I’m out here catching the bad guys for you.” Then she turns back to Dazai and raises her brows, arms folding her chest. “So, are ya the boss or nah?”

For some reason, she reminds him of Shirase. May he rest in peace.

Dazai offers her a wide grin in return and taps his mic. “90 seconds until the big bang.”

Their vehicle comes to a rumbling stop just in time, and their unit starts pouring out of the cargo bed and towards the small, lonely chapel with the man of the hour inside.

The morning of Dostoevsky’s capture has come, and it looks like this:

A large number of port mafia’s armed forces surrounding the building from all possible sides, with four of the strongest ability users leading the charge: Kouyou, the Colonel, Piano Man, and Atsushi-kun.

The catch is that Nami is among the grunts, responsible for winning the crucial five minutes to detain Dostoevsky à l'aide of her ability to freeze people in time. Chuuya is there to make sure she gets close enough. And Dazai…

Well, he is here for the fun of it.

And to avoid a possible Arahabaki disaster if Chuuya’s emotions get the best of him.

In other words, they are going to bait Dostoevsky into going out on a limb, exposing his soft flank, then rake it with ice from the side.

“Sixty seconds.”

The port mafia has scoured the entire piece of land for any traps or explosive devices to no avail. Dazai would have preferred it if they had. Dostoevsky has always been devious; it’s in his nature the same as it is in Dazai’s, but that at least means that they speak each other’s language. Right now though, Dazai doesn’t feel like he is understanding what the suspicious lack of *anything* from Dostoevsky’s side means. They haven’t yet encountered a single difficulty. No cast nets. No hidden cameras that will expose their criminal activities to the world again. No surprises in the form of ability users. Nothing.

Which can only mean so many things.

The most possible one is that he is going to hit them with everything that he has at once.

But they are prepared for that as well.

“Thirty seconds,” Dazai says as he takes position in the swarm of his

people, his tactical gear making him appear like a simple lower-level grunt. Capable enough to fire a gun, brave enough to die for his organization, but not important enough to pay attention to.

By his side, Chuuya's channeling his entire focus into his stare at the chapel's stone walls in front of him.

If eyes could kill…

Dazai and this church would be long dead.

Chuuya's gaze flickers to him then, softening just for a spare second.

Maybe they could bring him back to life as well.

Ready? Dazai mouths.

A firm nod.

As if Nakahara Chuuya would ever not be ready. Even against a demon like Dostoevsky.

Dazai returns his nods before studying Nami, who looks as though she is listening to a lecture on agriculture: bored out of her mind.

Fascinating.

"Fifteen seconds." Dazai pulls his shoulders back. Exhales. "Ten seconds. Get ready."

"About time, I'm bored as hell," Nami mutters under her breath.

Eight.

Seven.

"Getting into position," Kouyou's voice says from the other side of the building.

"Five seconds. Let's blast those hell gates open."

Four.

Three.

Two.

Dazai's mouth tastes like *wrongness*.

“One.”

The world erupts into the deafening sound of machine-gun fire coming from every single direction.

Above them, Dazai catches a flash of Kouyou’s *golden Demon* before it slices through the roof.

Beneath them, the earth shakes and rumbles, creating a terrain that is impossible to breach nor escape from all around them.

It looks, smells, and sounds like the sky is falling, and if it feels like that from within the lines, then it must be even worse to be on the other side of it, and that is not even taking into account their actual attack.

“Boss,” Albatross’ voice comes from the line — responsible for monitoring the situation inside the chapel.

Dazai perks up at the note of distress in his note. Immediately, a thousand different scenarios of Dostoevsky’s counter-attack dart through his mind. “What?” he yells. “Speak.”

“There’s nothing inside!”

Dazai’s head jerks back. “What do you mean, there is nothing inside? He’s gone?”

There is no –

“No, I mean that there is nothing inside that will help him! He went down to the floor and is… shielding his ears… there’s nothing inside!”

Dazai stares at the building.

What is Dostoevsky waiting for?

For them – for *him* to enter?

His guts twitch again.

“That’s our window!” Chuuya shouts, grabbing Nami and dragging her along as he presses himself against the wall of the church. His eyes dart to Dazai.

Dazai stares back but doesn’t move, feet rooted to the ground.

“What are we waiting for?!”

He doesn’t know either.

All he knows is that it feels wrong.

Dostoevsky taking cover from their attack?

It's as if he is literally offering himself up to them on the altar.

The problem with not looking into gift horses' mouths is that sometimes they turn out to be trojan horses.

But…

“Albatross, what’s happening inside?”

“He’s – he’s looking around? I don’t know, man; he looks confused!”

A jerk of Chuuya's head catches his attention; it looks like he will blow a hole in the ground if he doesn't move soon.

Dazai takes a deep breath before giving him a nod. “Okay. We’re moving.”

Everything after that happens quickly.

As soon as Dazai is next to him, Chuuya slams one foot into the stone, which is almost enough to bring down the whole building. The chapel is so small that they can see the entire interior at once: the two humble rows of folding chairs on each side — half of them toppled over from the force of their attack, the crosses on the walls, the incense and burning candles by the other wall, and the altar –

The altar that Dostoevsky is clutching to keep himself upright on his knees.

No traps.

No surprises.

No army.

Just a man.

A mortal man.

Everything seems to move in slow-motion, Chuuya stopping by Dazai's side, fingers curling tighter and tighter around themselves, Nami asking what they want her to do, and Dostoevsky –

Slowly, ever so slowly, he starts turning his head –

Dazai can feel the pressure increase inside the room as a powerful wind forms inside Chuuya's body.

Dostoevsky looks over his shoulder. A neat line of blood rolls down his cheek. He must have been hit.

A smile spreads across his face.

And Dazai knows without a doubt that he knew they were coming.

Of course he knew.

But he still doesn't move. Even as Nami charges forward with a warrior's cry.

Even as she manages to get both of her hands on his back, touching him, and freezing him — and that knowing smile — in time.

Dazai grabs Chuuya's arm and the air returns to its normal temperature again.

Chuuya sucks in a gulp of air before looking at Dostoevsky, frozen into place, then at Dazai.

It takes Dazai a few seconds to get his voice to work again before he taps his throat mic. "It's over," he says. "We're done."

Only it feels like this is just the beginning.

***

Twenty-four hours later, after they put ability-nullifying handcuffs on an unconscious Dostoevsky, put him in a full-body suit that will not allow him to touch himself or anyone else, load him into one of ten identical port mafia vehicles, transport him to a randomly generated location only known by the driver and the few select people who picked him up, load him onto the moby dick and into a secure room that not even an evil mastermind like him will be able to escape, Dazai closes the door behind him and eyes the man that is sitting cross-legged on the ground.

Dostoevsky blinks several times before he lifts his gaze to him. His head tilts to the side, but he remains quiet.

Dazai smiles and takes a seat in front of him, mirroring his position.

“Shall we begin?”

Chapter End Notes

Hello, I really hope you enjoyed the chapter! I know that I loved writing it :'')

Next up we have:
- a long game
- more of Kouyou meddling in skk's business
- and an accusation

Chapter 30: Six in the Fitfth Place

Chapter Notes

Warnings: sexual explicit content!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

03:49.

Chuuya has been standing here for three hours now.

Three hours since Dazai entered the interrogation room: home to Dostoevsky.

Three hours of waiting, waiting, and more waiting.

He lets another heartbeat pass before lifting his arm to look at the watch: 03:55.

Sighing, Chuuya rests his head against the wall.

Dazai's request for privacy made sense.

It's best to keep Dostoevsky in the dark regarding their — and anyone else's — relationship. Professional or otherwise. That just paints unnecessary targets on everyone's backs. Plus, Dazai shares history with the man. Chuuya's presence inside would be distracting.

And Dazai is the boss, which means that his word goes, regardless of Chuuya's personal opinion.

But that doesn't mean that he enjoys standing here, not knowing what is happening inside, whether Dazai currently has his hands around Dostoevsky's neck or whether they are having tea and reminiscing over old times.

Chuuya doesn't know what is happening to the man that is responsible for the Bishop's Staff. For hundreds of dead people. For infesting the country with his plague. For everything. And it drives Chuuya –

The door springs open. So does Chuuya, head snapping to Dazai as he locks up behind him and starts walking without so much as a glance in his direction.

"What the hell happened?" Chuuya growls, catching up to him.

“Nothing happened,” Dazai replies casually and lifts his fingernails to inspect them.

“What do you mean nothing happened? You’ve been in there for *hours*.”

“Yes, and I spent all of them staring at the wall or talking to myself because Dostoevsky didn’t.”

“Seriously?”

Dazai shrugs. “What do you expect? That he lets us capture him and spills all his secrets? He’s up to something. I can smell it.”

“So what, you’re just going to let him say nothing? Sit there while his organization kills hundreds of our people?”

“I am going to do what I do best: play the long game, which means not rushing things for half-assed unsatisfying results. I suggest you do the same.”

“You *promised*,” Chuuya snarls, grabbing Dazai’s wrist so the man at least will have the decency to look at him as he breaks the word that he gave him weeks ago. When Dazai stops it’s with his brows raised quietly, exuding the air of authority and command at the top of the food chain. Chuuya doesn’t care. “You promised to make him pay for what he did.” His neck feels stiff as he juts out his chin. “Or was that another lie?”

“I keep my promises,” Dazai murmurs, his voice deceptively soft as he stares him down with a sharp gleam in his eyes. Then he cocks his head. “The question is do you?”

Chuuya’s nostrils flare. “Of course I do.”

“Then how about you stick to your word and do as I say to get what you want, hm?” As if sensing Chuuya’s reluctance to give in, Dazai takes a step closer, eyes flickering from him to the door and back to Chuuya’s face. “Come on, Chuuya. I’ve got us this far. Dostoevsky is in chains and behind locked doors. He isn’t talking right now but he *will*. Eventually. It might take days, a week, or a month. You need to be patient. You can’t let your need for revenge cloud for judgment.”

“A month,” Chuuya echoes, voice raw. “And how many more of our people have to die in that time?”

Dazai never, not for even one second, flinches. “As many as it takes.”

“Not if we make him talk *now*. Let me go in there.”

“No.”

“Dazai –”

“Do you want him to crack or not?”

“Would I be standing here if I didn’t?”

“I’m asking for a reason, aren’t I?” Dazai takes Chuuya’s responding glare in stride, letting out a breath before he nods at the door. “Pain, torture, threats – those things don’t work on him. He’s not just some prisoner that will start chirping as soon as the interrogation squad steps foot inside. I need to get into his *head* and that requires time. It’s as simple as that.”

Chuuya wants to tell him that everyone breaks in the end — which is ironic considering he told Ace the opposite a while ago. It turns out though that Chuuya did break. He fell, shattered into a thousand pieces, and spilled all over the floor. Somehow Dazai managed to glue him back together but it’s still glue in the end, and it’s not the same as it used to be before either. Chuuya is glue and broken fragments and there are missing pieces that he will never get back again but there is something that will give this misery, this hollow existence some kind of a purpose and that is doing the same to Dostoevsky. Make him feel what Chuuya feels.

But before any of these words get out, Dazai’s fingers are touching his cheek, and it’s like Dazai is both the glue and the hammer because as soon as Chuuya follows the direction of his subtle touch, he feels like his insides are spilling all over both of them.

“Chuuya,” Dazai locks him with his gaze, refuses to let him look anywhere but at him either, “he is behind impenetrable doors. He can’t use his ability or any other tricks to escape. He’s going nowhere. We have him, okay? He can’t hurt anyone. You’re safe.”

It’s not about that.

Chuuya doesn’t need to feel *safe*.

What he needs is –

He needs –

He doesn't know what he needs.

Just that there is this tightness inside him, a live noose around his neck, and with every second that passes during which Dostoevsky has the upper hand, it tightens, and tightens, and tightens; and caged animals can only handle so much before they lash out.

Dazai's touch helps.

It always does.

But Dazai's touch isn't eternal.

Chuuya can't stitch their bodies together, as much as he sometimes wishes to do exactly that.

"Okay," he finally says — the only thing he can utter right now. "Yeah. Okay."

Dazai nods. His thumb traces the slope of his cheekbone before slipping away. "Sleep? You look tired."

Deep down, he feels tired too, but on the surface –

There are too many emotions running through him to let him sleep. A live wire of adrenaline that forces Chuuya to stay up on his feet even when his eyelids grow heavy. He shakes his head, denying himself something that they both know he wants. Needs. "I'll feel better knowing the door to his cell stays locked."

Dazai's gaze slides past him for a moment. "There are a few dozen guards stationed in front of his door." Their eyes meet. "He isn't going anywhere."

It's not only assurance but a reminder not to get stupid ideas into his head. To keep Chuuya out of the cell.

"I'll feel better making sure it stays that way," Chuuya repeats.

"Suit yourself then," Dazai murmurs. "You know where to find me."

Something about his tone, the look in his eyes before he turns away, makes Chuuya's chest constrict; he spends so much time thinking about his needs that he barely thinks about Dazai's. And there are a lot of things that Dazai could use. A lot of things that he doesn't utter out

loud but that he sometimes forgets to scrub off his face. His hands. His voice.

The same exhaustion clinging to Chuuya, only in another color. The weight of the port mafia, of his people, of this war pressing down on his shoulders. Demons that come back to haunt him from the past.

Sometimes Dazai jerks in his sleep and Chuuya just lies there, not sure what to do. He usually ends up punching or pinching his shoulder until he stops shaking and they both fall asleep.

It's almost enough to give in to the magnetic pull in his body and follow Dazai down the hallway, around the corner, and to the bedroom that they somehow ended up sharing.

Almost.

Instead, Chuuya presses his back against the wall and waits. Waits for the inevitable to come.

***

Chuuya's own bladder ends up betraying him. He's not even sure when he last drank something or what it was — either water or wine — but it is relentless enough to make him abandon his post and look for a bathroom.

After he's finished, he scrubs his hands with soap, then holds them under the hot water. It's then that it happens.

His eyes flicker up, and he sees it. In the mirror.

Instead of the same pair of eyes staring back at him that have done so for the last 15 years, he sees white. An empty, lifeless void.

His vision flickers.

His pulse plays an agonizing melody in his ears.

Then he sees what's on his neck, something red, something black, both of it abhorrent: strange markings that do not belong to his tattoo, that are not anything human either, but –

But something that he has already seen once.

Taking quick, jerky steps away from the sink, he cranes his chin down to find those things but –

But there is nothing.

His body is fine.

And when his eyes snap back to the mirror, the color blue greets him.

“I’m going insane,” he mutters to himself, scrubbing a hand over his face, clammy and flushed with sweat.

Maybe that's a good thing. He's not losing control, he's just seeing things — the better option between the two.

It doesn’t feel like something good though. It just makes him feel like he is losing his mind, and that is linked to losing control.

He starts walking without a particular destination in mind. Away from bathrooms and mirrors. Away from himself. He quickly decides that returning to guard Dostoevsky’s cell would not be the wisest choice in his current state. The fear of letting the man escape is big, but the fear of losing control again, doing something without realizing what is happening, who he is hurting…

It’s not just bigger. It doesn’t have a size. It’s *all-consuming*. It’s the definition of space itself. It sits in every molecule inside his body, buried in even the darkest corners of his being, and it festers. It grows. It feeds.

In the end, his feet carry him to the one place, the one person, that can quench that thing. Even if just for a few hours.

The bedroom is draped in shadows and filled with silence. Chuuya looks at the body under the covers. Dazai’s chest steadily falls and rises.

He leaves a trail of his clothes on the floor before climbing on the bed. Pausing, he waits to see if Dazai will turn and reveal that he has been lying awake all this time. There is a reason why he rarely bothers to sleep; Chuuya knows that now. All this time he thought Dazai didn’t want to but it has been the other way around. Sleep does not want to have Dazai.

Chuuya doesn’t face the same problem. He falls asleep just fine. It’s what he sees there… what he gives up every time he does that is.

A minute passes. Dazai doesn’t stir. Exhaling, Chuuya lifts the blanket and crawls underneath. First, he only lets his fingertips trace Dazai’s

back. The body contact is small and yet more than enough to make him release a full-body sigh, the dizzying sensation of relief filling his lungs. So it's not Dazai's ability that pulls Chuuya even closer, makes him press his nose against the back of Dazai's neck, take a deep breath, and slide his arm under Dazai's to eliminate all remaining space between their bodies. He is not sure what it is.

He hasn't been sure of a lot of things lately.

***

Dazai wakes up with hair in his mouth.

For a few terrible seconds, he does not realize it for what it is and believes that he is thirteen again, waking up gagged and blindfolded for one of his father's lessons, because while other families went to a shrine together twice a month, he and his siblings learned the many ways to escape and cause death every second Monday. But when his eyes flutter closed, he sees that it's just hair, that the hair belongs to Chuuya who is drooling onto the sheets, and that everything is remarkably pleasant right now. Dazai's arms are wrapped around Chuuya's waist and every place where their bodies press together burns with wonderful heat, the bed more comfortable than usual.

And –

"Dazai-kun? I'm coming in now."

— that is none other than Kouyou Ozaki telling him that she is about to invade his sanctuary and desecrate it.

"I'm *stark-naked,"* Dazai yells, covering Chuuya's ears with his hands so he won't have to wake up just because Dazai did. He was still awake when Chuuya came to bed earlier tonight. Still conscious to feel Chuuya wrap himself around him and cling to him as he shook silently. Leaving him alone had been a bad idea, but sometimes letting Chuuya make his own mistakes rather than spoiling them for him is easier. "So unless you want to have my ass imprinted on your mind, you will wait for me to come out!"

Kouyou's silence speaks for itself.

Dazai glances down at Chuuya between his palms, luckily still asleep, and savors the image before murmuring an apology and sliding out of bed. He grabs a bathrobe from the door, wraps it around himself, and slips outside, shutting the door behind him.

Kouyou has made herself comfortable at the round desk in his living room area. Her eyes scan him from head to toe, quickly zeroing on his expression to grant him a razor-sharp smile. “Good morning, boss. Decided to sleep in?”

A glance at the clock on the wall reveals that he has indeed decided to sleep in. Apparently. Dazai turns his grunt into a poised hum as he joins her at the table, discreetly tightening the belt around himself. “Gathering my energy for what’s ahead of us,” he says and takes a seat. “Something you should be doing as well rather than breaking into my living quarters, Ane-san.”

“And what is ahead of us exactly?”

“Straight to the point, huh?”

“As your advisor, I don’t see any point in beating around the bush. I need to be in the loop, boss, so I know what we are dealing with.” She looks at him. “Let me *in*.”

Dazai holds her stare for a moment. Then he sighs. “We have Dostoevsky. Our ground operations against the Bishop's Staff will continue until the man speaks. I’m afraid you came all this way for nothing. There is not much more to tell.”

“In that case, how exactly do you plan to make Dostoevsky talk? ”

“You of all people should not need to ask to know the answer to that,” he says, flashing her a smile only animals like them could understand.

But Kouyou doesn’t budge. “From what I’ve seen so far in the interrogation room, you have employed very little of the methods that I taught you.”

“That my dear mentor,” interlacing his fingers, Dazai places his chin on them and leans forward, “is because you tend to forget that I taught you a few things myself.”

Kouyou’s chin lifts ever so slightly.

Dazai continues. “Not everything is about torture and pain. The brain of Dostoevsky is too complex to be broken by a few instruments. Time is of the essence here. Strategy. Wits.”

“And you know he won’t respond to our usual methods because you have met him before?” she questions.

Dazai nods.

When that is all that he has to offer, Kouyou's face tightens for a millisecond before she reigns it in. "That is something you could share with me. Where did you meet him? What did –"

"He won't care if you threaten him with a good time. That's *all* you need to know."

"Fine," she relents even though Dazai can see the cracks in her veneer of control that his refusal to cooperate causes. "What about his friends that we hold captive then? Surely, they will be of use."

Dazai makes a sound of disagreement. "I doubt that. They're just props in his cat and mouse game."

"They could also be a symbol."

Dazai raises his brows.

"You might have a plan for Dostoevsky but to everyone else, to the port mafia, you look like you are twiddling your thumbs. Do I really have to remind you of the growing opposition that your leadership is starting to face?"

"No," he presses out and forces a smile. "I'm well aware of that."

"Are you?"

Dazai doesn't deem that worthy of a response.

He is. Of course he is. At the moment, it simply does not rank high on his list of priorities, and if he is being honest, it is sliding lower and lower every day.

If his people wanted democracy, they shouldn't have joined the port mafia.

"Make use of the hostages," Kouyou urges him. "Or of Dostoevsky. I don't care, but do *something* before your people decide to do it in your stead."

"My people, or *you?"*

"I want what's best for the port mafia. I still think that's what you are."

Translation: Should Kouyou stop sharing Dazai's vision, she will not hesitate to take whatever steps are necessary.

Such fierce loyalty to the cause.

It is what an organization like the port mafia needs.

Dazai conjures up a graceful smile, tossing one leg over the other, still mirroring Kouyou's posture even though she has stopped mentoring him years ago. Funny how these kinds of things remain ingrained inside you. Little seeds of habits. "Find me one hostage. One." He taps his finger against his knee. "And I'll give you your spectacle."

A symbol.

Something to believe in.

Kouyou tries her best to stop herself from gloating but it's visible, there, under the mask of sharpness and sangfroid. "Good. I will get on it immediately."

"Ah, I'm sure you will," he murmurs, rising to his feet and stretching his arms. "In the meantime, be so kind and stick to my office hours, Kouyou-san because I would not enjoy defining the boundaries of your new job for the third time."

"We used to have breakfast together all the time, *Dazai-kun,*" she reminds him. "Call me sentimental but I miss those times."

More like, she misses getting away with ordering him around without any consequences.

He stops on the threshold on his way to the bathroom to shoot her an empty smile. "Office hours!"

***

"Office hours!"

Dazai's words are followed by the sound of the bathroom door falling shut.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Chuuya strains to hear any other noises… or, more specifically: Kouyou leaving. It's a fruitless task considering it's Kouyou Ozaki he is talking about — the woman damn near floats instead of walking. He waits a few more minutes before getting to his feet and slipping into the hallway –

Only to end up face to face with Kouyou.

Kouyou, who hasn't left at all and who is looking at him like she has been waiting for him to come out of the room.

"Morning," Chuuya blurts out, scratching the back of his head. "What are you… doing here… so early in the morning?"

"Hoping to get to talk to you, Chuuya-kun."

"Me?"

She glances around the room as if to make a point that there is no one else but him that she could possibly mean. Well, Dazai is in the shower, but Chuuya heard their conversation and it clearly ended, so.

Yeah.

Him.

Clearing his throat and pulling his shoulders back, he passes her to head to the coffee machine. "What about?"

"I'd prefer to do it over tea. Or coffee," she adds with a pointed look in his direction. "Why don't you put on some clothes and join me for breakfast in my room?"

And what other choice is there but to nod and do exactly as she says? Deny her — Kouyou Ozaki, who even convinces Dazai Osamu to listen to her?

"Yes, ma'am," Chuuya mutters and abandons the coffee machine in favor of heading to his room.

Five minutes later, they are walking down the hallway side by side.

Kouyou has been very mysterious about what she wants to talk to him about, but Chuuya has a few ideas.

Judging by the conversation he heard her have with Dazai it might have something to do with Dostoevsky.

Or…

Or with Yuan.

So he decides to break the silence first.

“How is she?”

Kouyou doesn’t need to ask who he is referring to, of course. “Ambitious. Stubborn. *Angry*.” Her eyes slide to him but he keeps his gaze trained forward. “She sleeps less than I’d prefer to. Our bodies can only handle so much if we do not nurture them properly.”

Chuuya forces out a laugh. It’s not funny. Nothing about it is. Just ironic. “That sounds like her.”

“It would probably help if her only living friend didn’t insist on pushing her away,” Kouyou tells him. Just like that.

“I think my presence would do the opposite of helping her,” Chuuya mutters. It only makes sense: he wouldn’t want to see himself either if he was her.

Kouyou seizes him with a sharp look until he has no choice but to meet her eyes. “Has she told you that?”

Frowning, he shakes his head. “She doesn’t have to. I…” His shoulder slump. “She doesn’t have to tell me.”

“She doesn’t have to but she *would* have. That girl cannot keep her opinion to herself for the life of her.” It almost sounds like a grumble — a startlingly human thing from Kouyou to hear — as she shakes her head. Then the force of her disapproval lands on him though. “And you know that just as much as I do, if not better. The only reason you prefer to drown yourself in guilt and shame is that it is easier than facing reality.”

Chuuya bristles.

But Kouyou isn’t finished yet. “Face your actions, lad. Face your friend. And perhaps you will come to realize that you still have one left.”

Even the thought of that — that Yuan somehow has any love left for him — makes Chuuya’s chest feel tight enough to choke him. Kouyou is wrong. There is no way that his relationship with Yuan will ever be the same again. No way.

“Was that what you wanted to talk to me about?” he demands to know instead of responding to what Kouyou said.

Kouyou comes to a stop at the same time, fingers curling around the

doorknob of what must be her office. “No, lad. That is not what I wanted to chat to you about.” The heady smell of lotus welcomes him inside. “Have a seat.” Kouyou gestures on the other side of the chabudai, and he settles on a tatami cushion.

Chuuya’s brows squish together, trying to think of any possible topic she would want to talk about when he’s spent the last few months mostly working with Dazai and his own division only. He sees her now and then, sure, but his place under her wing during his first few weeks in the mafia has been filled for a long time now. “What’s this about then?”

She waits until the cup of tea is lifted to his mouth before she speaks. “About your affair with the boss, of course.”

The hot tea gets stuck in Chuuya’s throat. He chokes, desperately gasping for air a few times before he manages to gulp it down and get his lungs to stop burning. “I’m sorry?” he squeaks out. “My what?”

“Do not play dumb with me, boy,” Kouyou warns him, voice as soft as the winter sun and just as deceptive.

“I’m not — ” Chuuya cuts himself off before he gets out another stereotypical reply of denial and instead places the cup of tea back on the table. Swallowing before he replies. “Affair is an odd word to describe the relationship between two people that are married.” His eyes lift to hers. “Don’t you think?”

Kouyou grants him a small smile but he would be stupid to take it for what it is. “We all know what that marriage meant. It was a political alliance. A symbol. Nothing more and nothing less than that.”

“Yeah, a symbol of us two uniting or whatever, so is it really necessary to discuss what we may or may not do behind closed doors?”

“It is when you become the closest thing to one of the most powerful men in this city. Your decisions, Chuuya-kun, not only affect yourself anymore but the boss, the organization, and the city.” Her gaze is at once a warning and a look of pity. Chuuya clenches his jaw. “The moment you gave yourself over to him, you also gave up your right to privacy. *You* became the symbol. A statue.”

Chuuya’s nostrils flare, exhaling an irritated breath. “I didn’t give myself over to anyone. It’s a mutually beneficial relationship. It’s convenient because we have to spend our time together anyway. It —

”

“ — nonetheless makes you the wielder of a lot of power. Do not be misled, Chuuya-kun, I have no intention of intimidating you or instructing you on what to do. My primary duty is to serve the port mafia. To do that, you must understand what it means to be in a relationship with someone like Dazai. Whether you want to admit it now or not, you are running the port mafia right alongside the boss.” Her finger taps the rim of the cup. Or do you believe no one has noticed that you are the first mafia member in history to rise through the ranks this quickly?”

“To be fair, I told Dazai that making me executive would be a mistake,” Chuuya grumbles. “I knew how it looked.”

Never mind that they weren’t even doing anything back then. Well, except for a lot of gross flirting, but that doesn’t count.

“Then surely you can see what it looks like now.”

And he does. He can see how it looks: Dazai, the boss. Chuuya, his husband on paper, but also his executive, his on-and-off bodyguard, practically his right hand — once Dazai even called him *his little underboss.* It looks like Chuuya slept his way into Dazai's good graces even though the reality is that it happened the other way around: they fell into bed *because* of how much time they spent together. Because Dazai gave him the title of an executive. Because Chuuya somehow ended up by his side. Not *so*.

So he forces back the urge to deny the picture Dazai has painted of him, and pulls his shoulders back instead, chin lifting to meet Kouyou’s rapt gaze. “What is it that I should know then?”

A slow smile spreads across her face. Chuuya has only ever seen her at work in the interrogation unit once, but he imagines this is what the people see before she makes them sing like canaries.

"Let's begin with optics. You need to settle on *one* picture to present to the port mafia. Do you want to be Dazai’s bodyguard? His right-hand man? His executive? His whore?”

Chuuya slams his teacup down so hard that the tabletop rattles. “I want to be someone that you show a bit of fucking respect.”

“You still don’t understand, lad,” Kouyou says with a dismissive sigh. “This isn’t personal. This is business. Having just one image is

something we can deal with, but presenting a whole palette of them makes you risky. You cannot have it all. You have to choose."

"I can make all the choices you want, but it's not like Dazai will give a damn."

Kouyou raises her brows. "Are you saying you cannot sway the man's choice of actions?"

"I'm saying he's pretty stubborn, yeah," Chuuya replies, confused why that's even up for debate. It's Dazai Osamu, for god's sake, not some gullible grunt.

"Chuuya-kun." Kouyou scrutinizes him like they are both in on an insider secret. "Do not play stupid. At this very moment, the decisions that the boss makes are influenced by two things: his head and you." Chuuya begins to protest but she goes on without even batting an eye. "Don't waste your time denying the truth. The earlier you accept it, the less blood will need to be spilled. You occupy his bed and the majority of his time; it is only natural that he listens to you."

Chuuya's mouth opens. Then closes again.

Perhaps, deep inside, he has known this truth all along. While he may have stopped trying to understand why, it is clear that Dazai treats him differently from his other executives and subordinates. It just so happens that the side effects of this special treatment are what Kouyou wants him to exploit now.

The thing is that Chuuya isn't sure *he* wants to. Taking a clear position in front of the port mafia is good and well, but it also means rejecting the support that he desperately relies on these days and…

That is taking away a lot of things.

As if sensing his reluctance, Kouyou says, "Remember that we are merely discussing optics here. So if you choose to reject the role as his bed-warmer, what you do behind closed doors…" She gracefully leaves that sentence unfinished. "However, I would advise you not to roll around in the training areas where everybody can walk in whenever they please. We both know that you have more than enough options to be private."

The words tumble around in his head before he makes them drop with a nod. "Fine," he says. Keeping their private interactions private is not only manageable but also something he has wanted from the very

beginning — and his cue to hopefully finish this conversation. “Is that all?”

“It isn’t,” Kouyou sharply replies, keeping him right there in his seat. “Let’s talk about how you could facilitate the current politics as well.”

Eyes narrowed, Chuuya stares at her for a moment. “Facilitate. You want me to interfere with his decisions on other matters, too?”

“We are at an impasse, lad. Either this or the war against the Bishop's Staff will not remain our only conflict."

“If you think I’ll help you manipulate Dazai, forget it,” he snaps, and this time doesn’t let her keep him from rising to his feet. Dazai’s actions might not always make sense to the outside — hell, not even to Chuuya — but if the choice lies between Dazai and his power-hungry executives, then that’s not a choice but a one-way street.

“Sit down.”

“No, I don’t think I will.”

“Forget about protecting you, think about protecting *him.”* Chuuya halts with his back turned to her. “You care about Dazai. More than you probably expected to. Correct?”

“That’s none of your business.” The cliché response slips out before he has the chance to force it back.

When he glances over his shoulder, Kouyou’s wearing a knowing smile. “Oh, I think it is. And you know that. You care about him. So you should care about this too, Chuuya-kun. He is heading down a dangerous path, and I’m worried that my efforts alone will not be enough to help him this time. But you…” She folds her sleeves together in her lap. “You might just be the key to saving us all.”

It's a striking contrast to the thing that De Luca told him shortly before he died: *they said you have the power to destroy this world.*

But then again being the key of the port mafia and ruining the world… well, they boil down to the same thing in the end, don’t they?

“Your hopes are misplaced,” he tells her. “I know as much about Dazai’s plans for Dostoevsky as you do, and trust me, I’ve tried to find out more.”

“But have you tried smarter instead of harder?” She wants to know. “Why not take a page out of Dazai’s own book, hm?”

Chuuya lets go of the doorknob, and turns back to the executive. “I’m listening.”

***

“Here. For you.” Dazai shoves a bowl towards him — *pelmeni,* Russian dumplings, eaten with sour cream, soy sauce, and white vinegar. Piano Man ordered them from a local shop here in Moscow. “They’re your favorite, right?”

Dostoevsky eyes the dish. His mouth parts and he bites his bottom lip like he is trying to refrain from doing something — or act like it, in his case. The *pelmeni* remain untouched just like the topic of his end game.

“Hm, not hungry? Well, then allow me.” Lifting the bowl, Dazai takes a spoonful of dumplings and dumps them into his mouth. He chews for a long, long time, savoring the taste, before gulping it down and smacking his mouth. “I can see why,” he mumbles, digging in again. “It’s good. I like it.” Then he does it all over again.

Dostoevsky stops watching him after a few minutes, training his gaze on the empty, white walls around them instead. Dazai has to admit that he does a good job at looking nervous and uncertain. Just to what end is the question? Who is this performance of an innocent civilian for?

The port mafia?

Is this supposed to make them turn on Dazai?

Or is there someone else watching there? Perhaps it’s just the next step in Dazai’s career as the country’s latest terrorist.

“We have your friends, by the way,” Dazai announces eventually before he shoves some more dumplings into his mouth with a nonplussed shrug. “My people are out for your blood, so they decide to take it from…what’s her name? Alyona, I think. Sweet girl.”

Dostoevsky’s gaze snaps to him. His mouth stays shut though.

Dazai snorts. “Oh, don’t tell me you actually care about what happens to her?”

His response is a wordless glare.

“So we’re still in character,” he concludes before placing the empty bowl back on the ground and wiping his mouth with his hand. “I see. Then it’s only fair to play my part too, hm? Alyona isn’t the only one that’s going to bleed for your sins. For every day of my life that you waste, my people will get more and more bored.”

The mere act of uttering this fruitless threat makes Dazai want to bury his head in the ground. But the port mafia is watching, and they want to see something, even if the results are half as satisfying as his actual methods would be. This is the hardship that comes with leadership: it is not only about making decisions, but also about making them *look* good, and sometimes these two things contradict themselves.

“Would an innocent, good-hearted lawyer really let his friends bleed just to save his own –” *Knock, knock, knock.* Dazai smothers his irritation before it ever has the chance to become visible. “ — ass?”

The instructions are clear: in here Dazai is not to be disturbed unless something is quite literally burning, nor is anyone to enter. The latter his people apparently understood. The former, however…

“Why don’t you think about that for a while, hm?” Dazai murmurs, pushing himself to his feet after a final glance in his direction.

Outside, Gin is waiting for him, returning his scowl with an apologetic look. “I’m sorry for the interruption, boss, but something happened. The detective agency has requested a meeting.”

Dazai halts in his steps to look at them. “Did they now…”

A nod. “It sounded, uh, quite urgent. And hostile. Since Lippman ensured we had their support during the war against the Bishop’s Staff, I thought you would want to know about this.”

“You made the right choice,” Dazai says as they stride down the hallway. “Tell me everything.”

“They left a message. Despite Lippman's attempts to resolve the matter without your involvement, they insist on seeing you personally. They threaten to break the ceasefire if we do not accept."

“Did they say what it’s about?”

“Negative, boss. That’s all we know.”

Something in Dazai's guts tells him that he already knows. Just what exactly…

"Tell Albatross to change our course back to Yokohama."

"Yes, sir."

As Gin heads to the cockpit, Dazai heads to his office on board just to make sure there isn't anything else he should know about this unexpected request. Unfortunately, someone has beaten him to it. Kouyou is seated on his couch, while Chuuya's leaning against his desk. Their faces reveal that Dazai is not the only one who has been made aware of the situation.

"How are you planning to answer that preposterous demand?" Kouyou asks, jumping to her feet as soon as the door falls shut behind him. Chuuya looks up at him but doesn't say anything.

"We're heading back to Yokohama." Dazai crosses his office in unhurried, long strides, readjusting his collar as he takes a seat behind his desk. "Everything else, I'll decide after the meeting."

Kouyou looks at him like he has just proclaimed to give himself over. "You cannot be serious. The port mafia does not run to answer the calls of the detective agency. That is not how we operate."

"It's how we operate to ensure they remain allies," Dazai snaps back. "Not to mention that we owe them a favor after what their doctor did to save Yuan. I think you of all people should know that, Kouyou, since it's your girlfriend we're talking about."

"My personal relationships have *nothing* to do with port mafia business. We were both aware of that when we entered a relationship."

"Well, perhaps that was the wrong choice seeing as we might have known what this meeting would be about if you had paid a little more attention to your respective organizations."

Kouyou's lips press into a thin line. But just like Dazai, she is a master at channeling her personal grievances into pragmatism, so that her irritation is soon bleeding out of her with an exhale. "I urge you to reconsider this choice, boss. We do not owe the detective agency a favor of *this* size, and running to meet them in the middle of war will not bode well with our people. It makes us look *weak."*

“Do you know what else would make us look weak?” he murmurs. “Losing an ally that we need just because we were too proud and scared of optics to honor our agreement. And as much as I appreciate your input, Kouyou-san,” his voice gets louder, “your job is only to advise me, and then do whatever you can with the choices that I make. And right now, I choose to fly back to Yokohama, meet the agency’s president and discuss whatever it is that they want to discuss, and *then* I will decide what to do with the outcome. And if I will need your help, I will *call* for you, but until then, you will leave me alone to let me do my job and do your own damn job.”

“Boss, I mean no –”

“Leave,” he snaps. And when that is not enough: *“Now.”*

Kouyou juts out her chin primly and nods wordlessly. After another look at the desk, she turns to leave. For some reason, Chuuya pushes away from the desk, trying to do the same. “Not you,” Dazai mutters. “You stay.”

Chuuya stops in his tracks, waiting until the door falls shut before he slowly turns around to face him. His expression is more closed off than usual, revealing nothing but hesitancy as he leans back against the table quietly.

“Where were you this morning?” Dazai asks. “I came back from the shower, and you were gone.”

“Training,” Chuuya says.

“Pretty selfish, don’t you think? To leave the man you’re supposed to guard in favor of working out.”

“I’m also an executive, and there is nothing to protect you from up here.”

“Well, there is Kouyou, for one,” Dazai says with a sigh and leans back in his chair, rubbing his temple. “You could protect me from her instead of *teaming up with her:”*

Just as predicted, Chuuya slowly walks around the desk, though he stops a step away from him. “I ran into her on my way to find you. It’s not my fault that she badgered Gin into telling her about Lippman’s message.”

“Hm, I suppose it isn’t.”

“So the detective agency, huh? What do you think they want?”

Dazai stops pretending to be content with the distance between them and stretches out his legs until he can urge Chuuya to shuffle closer — close enough to slide his arms around his hips and smush his face against his abs. They’re hard and tense, not the most comfortable body parts to relax against, but the way Chuuya’s fingers tentatively come up to stroke his hair more than makes up for it.

“Who knows,” Dazai mumbles, voice muffled. “I have more than a few things that they might want.”

“And keeping them as allies is really worth giving up those things?” Chuuya asks above him. “You realize they’ll recognize you, us, if those two detectives that we met that one time come along.”

“Let them,” Dazai hums. “That will earn us a few brownie points even. And they’re important allies to have. Especially in this fight." They stole the Agency's prisoners right under their nose, but they also helped them — and that was the point all along. Chuuya will need that professional relationship with them in the future.

Chuuya is silent for a moment, the soothing motions of his fingers god-sent. “They have some kind of super-genius in the agency, don’t they?”

“Hm?” Dazai draws away to look up at him. “You mean Ranpo Edogawa. How do you know about him?”

“I did a bit of research on them after that one time we worked with them,” Chuuya admits with a shrug.

Dazai can’t help but grin as he tugs Chuuya between his thighs, rewarding his ambition with a kiss to his collarbone. “Clever boy. Yes, Ranpo-san is their most brilliant detective. What about him?”

“Well, maybe…” Chuuya arches his neck for him, eyes fluttering shut. “Maybe we can demand his services in our investigation against Dostoevsky?”

“It’s a good idea in theory,” Dazai murmurs between teasing nibbles, “but more complicated than that in reality. We might have a ceasefire, for now anyways, but that rarely comes with the exchange of services. We’re still criminals while they’re not.”

“But if you have things that they want?”

“With reason… things we don’t want to give up yet.”

“Then how about framing this as a favor… that they might want to consider returning with that… Ranpo detective?”

“Maybe,” Dazai mutters and lodges his hand in Chuuya’s uneven hair to drag him down to his mouth. “Maybe that’s an idea worth considering.”

He swallows the noise that Chuuya makes when their lips slot together, creating heated friction that demands an immediate outlet. Dazai loves the sounds he makes, the little breaths and hiccups whenever he gets mean, teeth tugging at Chuuya’s bottom lip, or the opposite — when his fingertips cup Chuuya’s face too gently. Dazai’s other hand quickly finds its way down to his ass, squeezing him through his leather pants before pushing him against his crotch.

They groan at the same time.

But that’s all the patience that Dazai can muster today.

“There,” he breathes out, slamming Chuuya into the desk, then reaching for his zipper to yank down his pants. “Hands down. Like this.” Once Chuuya’s bare from his waist down, Dazai pushes his chest flat against the countertop and raises his hips, giving Chuuya the opportunity to show off his obscene flexibility under the arch.

“Don’t move,” Dazai tells him, rolling back on his chair to press his mouth to the plum flesh of Chuuya’s ass. He smothers his skin with wet, open-mouthed kisses, fingers digging into it at the same time, massaging.

When Dazai spreads his cheeks until his hole flutters, Chuuya hisses; his muscles tense. “Shit… you do realize the door’s not locked?”

Dazai answers by parting his lips and dragging the flat of his tongue over his rim. Chuuya's shuddered gasp is music to his ears. “Do you want me to get up and close it?” he asks, stretching Chuuya's cheeks wider to lick him again, this time with just the tip of his tongue, swirling it around the puckered flesh.

Chuuya muffles his whine against the desk. His thighs tremble. “Fuck, no, I’ll kill you if you stop now.”

“Hm, I thought so too.” Dazai replaces his tongue with his thumb for a few moments, rubbing the spit-slick skin around his hole until it

twitches before he leans back in. “So glad we’re on the same page,” he murmurs and makes sure his hot breath washes over Chuuya's rim.

Judging by the shallow breath that escapes Chuuya, it does. Satisfied, Dazai gives him a few broad swipes with his tongue until he hears another muffled grunt. He then redoubles his efforts and presses his lips to Chuuya's fluttering hole and sucks, wet and messy.

Chuuya goes wild beneath him. Unconsciously, his hips jerk, and he forces himself still every time he notices it, though he does nothing to stifle the lewd noises coming from his mouth. With every suckling kiss, his arch gets deeper, his ass higher and closer to Dazai.

And that’s what drives Dazai insane.

Chuuya is as desperate for it as Dazai — always so damn loud and needy like Dazai's hands and his mouth are the only thing keeping him alive. That Dazai is all he needs. That's why Dazai prefers to leave the door unlocked. It pleases him that everyone could walk in and see Chuuya spread out on his desk like a five-course meal while Dazai eats himself dumb. It pleases him even more that this is exactly what Kouyou does not want him doing during office hours.

But just like her, Dazai does not care about the rules he has to break to get what he wants.

And what he wants is this. Chuuya. Coming undone right here and now.

“Do you like that?” he wants to know, pinching Chuuya’s ass and sucking two of his fingers into his mouth to get them nice and wet.

Chuuya nods, breathless.

Dazai’s palm flies over his flesh, the sound of the slap quickly overshadowed by Chuuya’s responding moan. “Say it. I want to hear your voice.”

“I like it,” Chuuya hisses. “You’re a bastard, but you’re fucking good with your tongue.”

“Oh, I’ll show you how good I can be with my tongue.”

Grabbing Chuuya’s right thigh, Dazai pushes it up and against the desk to stretch him before he dives in again. One, two, three licks over his twitching hole, and then he rolls his tongue into a tube and slides

it inside tight heat. Chuuya gasps, hips bucking back against him; every twitch of his muscles a striking demonstration of his despair.

Keeping his cheeks spread, Dazai fucks him with his tongue, adopting a rhythm that won't be enough to get Chuuya over the edge, but makes his sounds so much whinier. Dazai waits, and waits, and –

The sound of hands slamming against wood is followed by the crack of Chuuya's voice as he breaks. "Come fucking on... please. Just do it already. Please."

Dazai may be cruel sometimes, but not when his little husband asks so nicely.

He leans back to drive two of his slicked fingers into Chuuya, aiming for his prostate right away and doesn't relent when he finds it. Chuuya's already grinding back against the fingers, never one to just accept what he is given but always demanding more. It makes for such a gorgeous picture that Dazai allows it just this once, letting Chuuya fuck back against his fingers and licking around them until the crest reaches its peak.

After one particular grind, Chuuya stiffens and then –

Then he moans, loud and deep, moving in furious jerks of his hips. His cock only twitches as he comes dry. Even though Dazai loves making a mess of him, perhaps they got lucky this time. There is nothing fun or easy about cleaning cum off the desk.

Dazai keeps thrusting his fingers into him until Chuuya's noises turn into pained gasps and he begins squirming.

"Well, how was that for being good with my tongue, hm?" he asks as he pulls Chuuya back on his lap once his legs give out underneath him.

Head falling against Dazai's shoulder, Chuuya grunts out a sigh. "Show-off."

"I don't hear you complaining."

"Have no reason to…" After a moment, fingers slide down to Dazai's crotch to fondle the neglected erection that's trapped beneath his slacks. But when Chuuya tries to slip them inside, Dazai stops him with a firm hand around his wrist. "No."

“Why?” Chuuya demands.

Chuuya's offended tone makes Dazai chuckle with delight. “I’m saving myself for later. My plan is to fuck you so hard into the mattress that you won't be able to walk the next day.”

“You can fuck me now *and* later.”

“That wasn’t a suggestion, Chuuya darling.”

Chuuya exhales a huffy breath and removes his hand. “Fine.” His next sigh lacks any genuine tension though, giving Dazai’s knee a gentle squeeze before staggering to his feet to pick up his pants. “Then have fun spending your day with that hard-on.” He shoots Dazai a sickly-sweet smile over his shoulder once his ass is back in its leather prison. “I hope it hurts.”

Dazai returns it with a grin of his own.

Little does Chuuya know that a bit of pain is just what Dazai needs to be able to think sharper.

“I’m sure Chuuya will help me feel better again soon.”

Chuuya grunts out an unconvinced sound and leaves.

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Usually, a meeting of this sort — between the two heads of two rivaling organizations — should take place on neutral ground. Seeing as the port mafia has scattered into the skies and, more or less, abandoned its tower ever since Dazai had been labeled a terrorist, he decided to host the meeting in the tower, after all. (Also due to Kouyou's nagging insistence to maintain the upper hand.)

So here he is, seated behind his former desk, the breath-taking view over the city’s skyline to his right and both, Chuuya and Kouyou, keeping guard behind him, as his men swing the doors open somewhere in the back of his office and the sound of *four* feet approaching.

Dazai has been anticipating this.

To see not only the armed detective agency’s president, Fukuzawa Yukichi, walk through his office but Oda Sakunosuke as well. Oda's ability is the best for keeping the president safe. It makes sense.

And yet Dazai feels his breath coil in his lungs and refuse to leave anyway.

Oda.

Odasaku.

“That’s close enough,” Chuuya’s voice says behind him, and the two men stop a few steps in front of his desk.

The president gives Dazai a curt nod of acknowledgment –

But Dazai barely notices that, too transfixed by the raw anger that he sees swirl inside Odasaku’s eyes. For a moment, he wonders where such a grand emotion comes from, what it’s doing here. Then he realizes that it’s directed at none other than him.

He presses his lips shut. Dips his head. He almost forgets to lift it again but Odasaku’s temper isn’t the only one that fills the air. If he pays his respects to the detectives for a second longer, his executives might just explode.

“Fukuzawa-shachou. Oda-san.” Dazai allows his eyes to linger on his face — even if it’s a loud glare that’s staring back at him — for a few moments longer than necessary. “What brings you here on such urgent notice?”

“As we’re both busy, we’ll keep this visit short,” Fukuzawa says. His voice never, not once, wavers from its flat and thick monotony. “We know that you have a man named Rodion Raskolnikov in custody. We demand you to release him immediately.”

A fluttery sensation makes Dazai’s insides flop from side to side, side to side, and again.

On the surface, he keeps his eyes wide and alert though, his mouth sharp and wicked. “I’m afraid I have no idea what you mean.”

Odasaku’s legs jerk like he wants to step a face forward. But a single glance from the president keeps him still and obedient. Fukuzawa turns all his attention on Dazai next. “We have evidence that you have him. There is no point in denying it. All we ask for is to give him over to us, and we will go quietly. Our ceasefire will remain until decided otherwise.”

Does the port mafia have a mole?

No, no, no.

That is the wrong question to ask.

The right one is what the Detective Agency wants with Dostoevsky.

Sure, the port mafia didn't give him a rightful persecution, but how d*o* they know what role Dostoevsky plays in this fiasco?

Questions over questions. Every single one of them buzzes through Dazai's skin like a wasp.

"Suppose, we might have someone that might be Dostoevsky," Dazai relents, cupping his cheek with his fingers and tilting his head to the side. "Why would we give him to you and for what purpose, pray tell?"

This time, Fukuzawa looks at Odasaku and nods.

This time, Odasaku steps forward and directs all his might at Dazai. "Because we know what you've planned for him and we're not going to let that happen."

"Watch your tone," Chuuya snaps.

But Dazai is too dreadfully curious to intervene. Unable to even take his eyes off Odasaku as he continues, without the sneer but just as angry. "Rodion told me that you had been after him *years ago.* How obsessed you are with him. The lengths you'd go to get your hands on him —" his eyes flash at Dazai, more violent than the impact of brass knuckles. "I remember you." Dazai's breath snags in his lungs. Then Oda jerks his chin forward. "You and your bodyguard, or whoever he is. You were there months ago, pretending to be the authorities. Was that part of your plan? Just another game? And all for some *book*? Don't tell me ruling over an entire criminal syndicate isn't enough for you."

Dazai blinks. His hand lifts to scratch at his bandages. When he notices what he is doing he stops again. "I must admit that is a creative set of lies that *Dostoevsky* told you, but unfortunately it's still a lie." He smiles an empty smile. "You have been deceived, detectives."

"We do not take such claims lightly," Fukuzawa tells him. "Nor do we want to start a war with the port mafia and compromise the tri-part-framework that has been keeping the city safe for years, but we do not

tolerate the level of injustice that you have planned to bring onto this world." His gaze shifts then, drifting past Dazai to his people at his back. "Our problem is not with the organization, but with your boss. That's why we are willing to hold onto the ceasefire if you release Raskolnikov at once and take care of this deception yourself."

Odasaku slowly motions at his trenchcoat as he looks at them, though he makes a point of only looking down at Dazai. "I have a folder inside my coat. I'm going to take it and show you that my friend is telling the truth."

My friend.

Dazai feels his executives shift, not happy with that, but he keeps them patient and still with a flick of his hand — a signal for Oda to go on.

The folder is thin. A few pages in length. It lands on Dazai's desk with a sharp slap.

When Dazai doesn't stir, Odasaku flips it open.

The first thing inside is a black-and-white picture of a group of people: around twenty of them arranged in two neat rows. The majority of them wear the tattered, dark robes that are characteristic of the Bishop's Staff —

And a man in the front row wears Dazai's face.

"Raskolnikov isn't behind the Bishop's staff. He never has been. Your boss here only orchestrated it to seem like it." Dazai lifts his eyes to Odasaku, who stares right at him when he says, "Because it's been him this entire time."

Chapter End Notes

> Thank you all for the super nice feedback! And for the not-so-nice one as well lol. For anyone wondering what's up with that: there's been someone who has been harassing me and many, many other bsd artists and writers for months now. There is not much to say about that person except that they're pretty pathetic, but seeing that bullshit as soon as I open my inbox does get frustrating sometimes. Still, comments mean a lot to me, they give me the necessary motivation and inspiration to write and update as often as I can, so I don't want to limit or disable them just because of one little bitch, and neither do I want to engage with their

comments more than I have to, so I usually just ignore them.

All my love to everyone who has regularly left me their kind words and encouragement <3 Ily

Next up we have:
- a meltdown
- a switch
- and a take-over ...

Chapter 31: Abdication

Chapter Notes

> Thank you again to Emily for betaing this and the past dozen chapters, for being so supportive and endlessly inspiring, and generally a wonderful human being <3 Also, strongly urge everyone to check out her works because her writing is actual perfection
>
> Warnings: sexual content (both bottom Chuuya and bottom Dazai); also, the scene toes the line of dubcon so please proceed with caution!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“How dare you come here and stand in front of the boss of the port mafia only to suggest something *this* outrageous?”

“I assure you, miss, we didn’t make the decision to come here lightly –”

“Then don’t take this lightly either: one more word and we will have our men throw you into a dungeon so –”

Dazai raises his hand once more and Kouyou falls quiet with a sharp inhale. Chuuya can’t see what or who Dazai is looking at from the back, only that the detective’s eyes, the one called Oda Sakunosuke, harden.

“Go.” That’s all he says: *go.*

“Not until you release Rodion,” Oda says.

This time, Dazai’s head tilts to gaze over his shoulder. Just minimally. But it’s enough to send a signal to both Chuuya and Kouyou. They charge forward without wasting a beat. The golden flash of Kouyou’s demon slices through the air as Chuuya manipulates gravity to seize the two detectives. They are fast — they must be if Dazai considers them to be valuable allies. But they are not him. They are not Kouyou.

“Leave,” Chuuya hisses, as the golden demon’s sword holds both of them at blade-point, “before my boss changes his mind.”

The president does not falter under the threat, not even for one

second. The stony gaze that he turns on Dazai is unyielding. “Your organization has been reasonable up until now. Don’t break that tradition now.”

The golden demon presses the sword closer.

The president exhales, then gives the other detective a nod. Oda Sakunosuke doesn’t look too happy about it, even mutters, “this isn’t over” but they both turn to leave. Kouyou fishes out a radio and orders the Mafiosi outside the office to escort the two men outside.

Chuuya’s scowl wanes into a confused frown when he turns back to Dazai because Dazai…

Dazai looks out of it. His one visible eye hollow and vacant, staring into nothing. Like his soul just up and left him without saying goodbye.

And it doesn’t make any sense.

This is clearly Dostoevsky’s doing. A setback that is designed to alienate Dazai from his own people, Chuuya assumes. It’s not good obviously, but for Dazai to be this rattled?

It’s strange.

“Hey,” Chuuya says, planting both of his palms on the desk and trying to catch Dazai’s gaze. To no avail. “No one’s going to believe this crap.”

“No one outside this room is even going to hear of it,” Kouyou chimes in. “We’ll make sure of it, boss, but for that to happen, we will have to break the ceasefire with the Agency and take them out once and for all.”

Dazai finally blinks… only to shake his head. “You will not touch them.”

Chuuya casts a glance towards Kouyou before looking at Dazai. “Are you sure? Because they’re convinced that you’re behind the Bishop’s Staff while Dostoevsky is some kind of innocent pariah.”

“They’re victims of his games, just like us.” The corners of Dazai’s mouth creep up and form a horrible parody of a smile. Chuuya has to force himself not to avert his gaze. Turning to face the ceiling, Dazai sighs. “Just like me. Heh.”

Kouyou slams her hand on the table all of a sudden. “Snap out of it. This is not the time for theatrics. We have to act *now*. Before the agency does. You cannot avoid this fight without letting this shameful conspiracy theory run loose throughout the entire organization.”

“Wow, Ane-san. I knew you had some special kinks but to see you so eager to kill your girlfriend? I’m surprised.”

“My girlfriend will be smart enough to choose the right side to survive,” Kouyou snaps.

“She won’t have to. We’re not starting a fight against the Agency.”

“You’re being irrational. *The Agency* just waltzed in here and accused you of being the puppet master behind an organization that we are fighting, so unless…”

Blending out the spitfire of arguments around him, Chuuya grabs the folder from the desk and starts flipping through it. To see what kind of *evidence* they claim to have aside from a damn photograph that everyone with a computer and a photo editing program could have manipulated. Not to mention, that there are people out there with abilities that do the same thing.

It looks like a jumbled mess of information to him, at first, taking him a few minutes to understand what he is seeing. A lot of money flow, bank numbers that supposedly lead back to Dazai, witness testimonies describing his person — tall, dark-haired, clever, and cunning — and several sightings of him in places that are now connected to the Bishop’s Staff.

It looks like something, but only on the surface.

There is not a single thing that actually gives this accusation any credibility.

“It’s bullshit,” Chuuya says again, tossing the folder back to the desk. “I thought they were supposed to be good at their jobs. Why do they believe in such crap?”

“Because whether it’s real or not doesn’t matter.” Kouyou fires a pointed glare at Dazai, who is now leaning against his desk to stare off into space. “Sometimes a mere seed is enough to plant doubt in someone. Things will become very dangerous if we don’t act immediately and destroy any shred of evidence and the people who are responsible for putting it here.” When that only earns her silence:

"*Boss.*"

Dazai does not move. Chuuya is not even sure he is breathing behind that veil of void in his eye.

"Dazai…" After a shared glance with Kouyou, Chuuya sucks in a breath of courage and steps around the desk to lean down to him and gently touch his shoulders. "Hey, c'mon. It will be alright. We just have to do something…. Preferably as soon as possible."

"…"

"Dazai."

"…"

"Dazai," he snaps and shakes him, trying to rouse him from his mental coma. And while Dazai's body moves under him, his gaze remains… gone. Somewhere else.

Helpless, Chuuya lifts his eyes to Kouyou to ask her a silent question.

Kouyou replies with a grim stare, lips forming a thin line before she exhales and raises her chin. "I will deal with this." She jerks her chin towards the file. "And you deal with… that." Meaning: Dazai.

Her gaze turns dead-serious when she catches Chuuya's gaze. "Do not breathe a word of this to anyone outside this room, got it? We do not know of any folder, book or accusation. The boss is currently taking a nap. That's it. That's all that happened."

Chuuya's chest sags but he nods. "Yeah. Got it."

"I'll be back soon."

With Kouyou gone, he has no choice but to tackle his own task. There is only one problem: the task in question is catatonicizing into the desk.

Chuuya shuffles over to squat down in front of Dazai to at least to look at him as he speaks. "What's –" He pauses and thinks carefully before continuing. "What can I do to help you?" is what he asks. "What do you need me to do?"

But even though those words were enough to get Chuuya's attention when his stitches were coming loose, these ones are not even able to break through the wall in Dazai's head. So he cups Dazai's cheek,

squeezes him gently. “Hey… please say something. Anything. Just one word, so I know you can hear me.”

And… nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

But maybe that is what Dazai needs. Maybe he needs Chuuya to do nothing but be there, for now, let him go through whatever it is that he is going through. He does not understand why this caught Dazai so off-guard. And whether it’s even the blatantly false accusation that triggered this reaction or something else that Chuuya doesn’t know about.

He can't fathom why he never realized how close Dazai has been to losing it as well.

Chuuya’s job is not to interpret actions, though. It’s to make sure that Dazai is safe — even when he isn’t okay. So that is what he does.

It works because eventually, Dazai lifts his chin. Eyelid fluttering. Then he unfolds himself from the desk entirely to sit up.

Chuuya watches him and follows him to his feet when he gets up. “You’re back,” he says as Dazai turns around and starts walking in the other direction. “What do you want me to –”

The door of his apartment slams shut in front of Chuuya’s face. “— to do…” he finishes to himself as the grand silence of the office swallows him.

****

Two hours later, Chuuya is still awkwardly hovering in front of the door. He went inside a while ago — just to make sure Dazai didn’t escape — and while Dazai was there, he was still refusing to talk or do anything. He basically just relocated from the desk to the floor of his bedroom. This time, however, Chuuya is no longer alone. Next to him are Kouyou, Albatross, and Piano Man—the only two other people who have been deemed trustworthy enough to let in on the situation. Albatross doesn’t have a single disloyal bone in his body, so that makes sense. Piano Man is in charge of shredding the evidence the agency has gathered.

“You should go inside,” Kouyou tells Chuuya for the fifth time in a row. “We can’t proceed without his presence or input when the last

order he gave was not to touch the agency."

Chuuya scrubs a hand across his face, groaning under his breath. "I told you I already went inside. It's no use. I can't get through to him."

"Well, then we're all fucked," Albatross ever so helpfully says. "If you can't go through to him, no one can."

"You've all known him for years, so why does it have to be me?!"

The looks he receives are identical — if it were any other situation, Chuuya would have laughed. As it is, he just scowls. "What is it with you, people? I at least *tried*. And you're still standing here, telling me what to do instead of trying yourselves!"

Hands planted on his hips, Albatross makes a face. "I would if I thought I had any chance, but dude… you're… you."

Rolling his eyes, Chuuya turns his attention *and* his expectations to Piano Man instead. He is a reasonable man most of the time. Surely –

"Don't look at me. I agree with him. If there is any hope of, hm, getting the boss to act, then that hope lies in you. I can try, but that would be a waste of time and right now, we can't afford to lose that."

"Seriously," he mutters and finally looks at Kouyou, though she does not have to speak to make her standpoint clear.

She does anyway. "You can do this, Chuuya-kun. You already got him to move, so I'm certain you will make him speak in no time too."

"He only moved to lie down on the floor of his bedroom!" Chuuya snaps.

They all stare at him in silence.

Because they all know that it does not matter, not really. Dazai needs to pull himself together, and since they believe they can't do it, Chuuya will have to — regardless of whether he believes he can.

And he knows that too; he does. It's just…

He spent so much time marinating in his own misery that he forgot that Dazai — the terrible, all-mighty boss and Chuuya's personal living, breathing crutch — can fall too. And that's scary. Knowing that the person who is supposed to be Chuuya's support system is not all too stable himself.

It's also unfair to have such expectations of someone. Selfish. Probably unhealthy too. But Chuuya hasn't had time or space to think about any of that lately.

He used Dazai to keep himself functioning and now *Dazai* is malfunctioning.

All the more reason for Chuuya to go in there and take action. It's the least he can offer after everything that Dazai has done for him.

"Fine," he finally says, wrapping his hand around the door knob but pausing to shoot the others a warning glare. "I do this, but you better make damn sure, there is something worth coming back to."

"We hear you loud and clear, boss," Albatross says with a salute. Then he sucks in his cheeks. "Underboss. Boss… in proxy."

"We'll take care of it," Kouyou replies, not as amused by all of this as Albatross.

Piano Man nods. "Leave it to us, executive."

With that, Chuuya turns the doorknob and goes back in.

It's still dim, the air thick and miffy, and Dazai…

He is still lying on the floor. The dark carpet blends perfectly with his hair and clothes, making it look like he has fused with it. A little like a cat that its owners spend hours looking for just to find it unbothered on some carpet that matches its fur. Only this one, is a big cat. Big and tall and the opposite of unbothered.

He chews on his words for a while before he decides to go about it another way. He drops to one knee, then the other, and lies down, face turned towards Dazai.

Minutes pass. Dazai's gaze remains vacant, fixed on something that Chuuya cannot see, bleeding from a wound that is not visible to the naked eye. And then something must change because Dazai looks at him — really looks at him — tilting his head as if he just noticed Chuuya's presence for the first time.

"Hi," Chuuya says.

Dazai stares at him. Then: "What are you doing?"

Chuuya glances around himself and shrugs weakly. "Just… chilling."

After a blink, Dazai rolls his head to face away from him and whispers, “You should leave.”

“Do you want me to?”

Silence.

But that’s answer enough.

Chuuya stretches out his hand and strokes a finger down Dazai’s shoulders, just long enough to show that he is still here. “Tell me,” he says instead. “Tell me what you need from me, what you need me to do for you.”

“A lobotomy.”

Chuuya’s brows shoot up. He stares at the back of Dazai’s head for a puzzled minute. “I’m sorry, what?”

“Perform a lobotomy on me.”

“I don’t think that would be… wise.”

“Then don’t ask stupid questions.”

“Ask me for something possible then.”

A pause. “You can barely hold yourself together. What makes you think you can do anything for me?”

Dazai’s cruel tone stings. But Chuuya is no stranger to it. Sometimes, when he feels like drowning, that sharp tongue of Dazai’s, that touch of cruelty, and the spark of real fear it elicits are his only breath of fresh air.

“I can try,” he murmurs. “If you let me.”

The silence that follows is so long that Chuuya starts worrying he has lost Dazai again.

Then Dazai rolls around, still very much there. More so than in the last few hours. Just not the same as the man that Chuuya has spent the last months of his life with. This one…

There is something frozen inside him. That kind of eerie silence that chases all living animals in the opposite direction. And when he looks at Chuuya, with that depthless black in his one eye, Chuuya feels like

a tiny insect that got caught in the wind, getting sucked into the eye of the storm.

Dazai's arm moves towards Chuuya, seeking out his cheek to trail his fingertips down the slope of it. "I'm so angry, Chuuya."

"With Dostoevsky?" he asks after gulping down a breath. Dazai touches him like his fingers are the blade of a knife. With soft precision, as well as with a warning. This warning comes in the form of his hand clamping around Chuuya's face. Squeezing. Hard.

"With myself."

It doesn't hurt — not enough to leave, at least. But Chuuya's breath stills nonetheless, uncertain of what to anticipate next.

"I didn't see it coming." Even though Dazai is right here, he sounds like he is speaking from a place that's kilometers away. "I walked right into it."

"None of us saw it coming," Chuuya argues, voice thick.

"What's the punishment for this kind of failure?"

Chuuya has no answer for that. Yet it's precisely *now* that Dazai zeroes in on him, seeking out his gaze as desperately as he seeks out a response. A solution. "Tell me. What needs to happen to punish such worthless incompetence?"

"You're not worthless or –"

Dazai interrupts him with a hiss but instead of shoving Chuuya away, Dazai rolls over until he's above him and staring down at him with one wide, twitching eye. Chuuya swallows. Suddenly keenly aware of every single breath that he takes, feeling like one wrong move might get him bitten. Or worse.

A startled noise escapes his throat when Dazai presses his mouth to his, hard, more teeth than lips, and desperate — so desperate that Chuuya has to fight to not get swept up in it, to stay grounded so Dazai can fall apart. Because this is what it's about, he thinks. Falling apart, and coming together again.

Dazai doesn't have the patience to be slow and thorough. Soon he is already tearing Chuuya's shirt apart, yanking down his leather pants and working on his own zipper with jittering fingers.

“I always carry this around for you, you know,” Dazai says, holding up a travel-sized tub of lube that he fished out of his pocket. The words are as empty as his eye.

Chuuya exhales a shallow breath. “Thank you.”

“For you,” Dazai repeats. “You’re *so* needy, Chuuya.”

What to answer to that — what to even think — he has no idea.

Is needy something he ever wanted to be? No.

Did he become it anyway? Yeah.

Does it hurt to hear Dazai say it like that, like it’s something he has waited a long time to say? Maybe.

But is now the time to think about that?

The answer is no.

So Chuuya just holds his gaze in response, not looking away.

Dazai understands perfectly. He coats a few of his fingers in lube and wraps them around his cock, stroking himself to full hardness before he’s already climbing over Chuuya and lining himself up. It hasn’t been that long since their romp in Dazai’s office on the aircraft, ten hours max, but they make themselves palpable when he pushes inside.

But Chuuya refuses to slow it down when he already made the deliberate choice to do this without prep. He can’t fail Dazai now that he needs them. He needs to be the same kind of crutch that Dazai is for him. He relaxes. Artificially, at first, by focusing on his breathing. And then actually, when Dazai spreads his thighs and starts fucking him with reckless abandon, and Chuuya’s blood begins to swell with heat.

The carpet is thick enough to allow Chuuya to wrap one leg around Dazai and plant the other one on the floor to give back as much as he can. It draws a muffled hiss out of Dazai. The bandages around part of his face must have come loose at some point, Chuuya doesn’t know when, because when Dazai’s head rolls back to stare at him, it’s both of his eyes that take Chuuya in. They devour him with such scrupulous intensity that the eye contact makes his guts twitch more than the hips snapping into him.

His mouth opens. He wants to say something — needs to say something the same way Dazai always does when it's Chuuya on the other end. Perhaps something cruel and sharp, able to cut through the cords around his neck. Or maybe something nice. But the seconds stretch, their chests fall and rise in the same rhythm, and nothing ever comes out of Chuuya.

All he can do is…

Act.

Whenever words fail him, and they so often do, the only weapon that remains in his arsenal is action.

So Chuuya slides his arm around Dazai's neck tighter and drags him as he pulls himself up. Their mouths meet in the middle for a breathless kiss that *burns*. They kiss but it's less about finesse or technique or even pleasure, and more about the simple act of feeling. Feeling something. Anything at all. Chuuya feels, and hearing the broken noise that shudders through Dazai from the very bottom of his breastbone, he knows that Dazai does too.

Dazai's chest is still shuddering when he buries his face in Chuuya's shoulder, clutches his hip bones like a lifeline, and comes. Chuuya groans at the surge of warmth that rushes through him, digging the heels of his feet into Dazai's back until his thrusts slow down, and the carousel they have been riding comes to a staggering standstill.

Chuuya didn't get there himself but it's something that he will take care of later on. For now, he is content to sink into the carpet and drive his fingers through Dazai's wild hair.

Then a hand catches his wrist and presses them next to his side. Chuuya blinks, breathing hard as Dazai lifts his head to shoot him a sardonic grin. "What, think that little bit is enough?"

"I told you," Chuuya says, returning the stare without flinching. "Whatever you need, I'll give it to you."

"Oh, Chuuya. You haven't even begun understanding the things that I need. Are you really up for it?" The laugh that he directs at the ceiling is a hollow, dry thing. Dazai's sigh when he looks back at him even emptier. "Kouyou will understand if you say it's pointless. I mean, it's not like you didn't try."

It doesn't surprise Chuuya that Dazai knows exactly what has made

him enter this room and offer himself up in whichever way necessary. A sacrifice for a king. It's Dazai, for god's sake. None of the words that come out of his mouth at the moment really faze Chuuya anymore.

So the only reaction that Dazai gets from him is an unimpressed scowl. "You're having a shit day, Dazai. Get over yourself. You're not special for that, so if you want me to help, I'll do it, and if you don't, I'll leave. But don't fucking try to scare me away like that's something that would work on me."

For a moment, Dazai studies him like he is trying to see inside his brain. Head tilted, eyes gleaming with curiosity that could turn dangerous if Chuuya doesn't pay attention, scrutinizing him like his next interrogation target. Dazai even lets go of Chuuya's wrist to brush his sweat-soaked bangs aside.

And then, an eternity later, he shrugs and lets out a laugh, loud and genuine before he rolls off Chuuya. "Okay then." Frowning at the mess that's dripping out of him, Chuuya wipes himself clean with a spare napkin that he finds in his pocket before he rises to his feet and gets a look at the man on the bed: sprawled on top of it like a king waiting to be served, his fingers laced behind his neck, and his smile full of dangerous promises. Their gazes meet and Dazai gives him a knowing nod — except that Chuuya has no idea what he means this time. "Go on, Chuuya. Fuck this shitty day that I'm having out of me."

The words take a moment longer to register. It's not that the idea of fucking Dazai is unfamiliar to Chuuya — he's thought about it plenty, trust him — but it is something that they haven't done so far, whether out of familiarity or because of an unspoken decision that they have both settled on at some point during the last month.

But here Dazai is, demanding exactly that and Chuuya would be stupid to deny him — and himself — of fulfilling his wish.

"Okay," he says slowly, stalling for time as he climbs on the bed and shuffles over until he is straddling Dazai's waist, one hand settling on top of his chest. "How?"

Dazai's head tips to the side in parodical amusement. "You want me to explain how to fuck someone? My, Chuuya –"

"Fuck off, you know exactly what I meant," Chuuya cuts in with a growl. "How do you want it?"

It feels like something he should know by now. Dazai might have

asked him about his boundaries and preferences before, but he already had an idea about how to take Chuuya apart. He *knew*. Chuuya has some ideas, sure. It's Dazai he is talking about, though. You could spend years trying to peel away the layers that he keeps around himself and still, only find defense mechanisms and protective armor. And Chuuya wants more than that if he is going to do this. He wants to tug at the *right* thread. He wants Dazai to unravel like yarn underneath him.

Dazai exhales, looks away, annoyed by the request, and Chuuya's stomach twists.

"Oi, don't act like this is a stupid question. I'm not a fucking mind reader."

"Yes, yes, Chuuya always needs instructions to follow," he chides softly with a grin that's meant to provoke Chuuya into fucking him with anger rather than concern. "Ever the good boy."

Making a low noise in his throat, Chuuya wraps his hand around Dazai's cock, none too gently, and gives him a warning squeeze. "You through?"

Dazai responds with a stuttered laugh, letting his head fall back on the bed and staring at the ceiling. Chuuya doesn't think it's out of pleasure – his grip is meaner than it is nice right now. Dazai just doesn't want to be looked at. Doesn't want to voice what he needs either.

"Ah," Chuuya says, latching onto that. "No, that's not going to do. You'll have to look at me."

Dazai's Adam's apple bobs before his gaze slides to him, lazy as ever, but Chuuya doesn't miss the fleeting flash that bounces off the darkness of his pupils like light reflecting off the water. "I thought you wanted instructions instead of giving them."

"Yeah, and I don't hear you give me anything, so I gotta get creative, huh?"

"How about you try to pick up the pace while you're at it, too?"

If this was any other situation, Chuuya would marvel at Dazai's blatant hypocrisy. For someone who is always scolding Chuuya for being impatient and brutish, he isn't doing much better himself right now. As it is though, Chuuya's dick is still hard, and he does want to get this show on the road.

Blindly finding the lube, he pops the cap open and squeezes out enough of it to cover a few fingers, all while keeping eye contact with Dazai. Dazai, who is still doing his best impression of boredom and disinterest. Who is still trying to get a rise out of Chuuya because he doesn't want to say that he wants it rough.

Chuuya can't give him the punishment that he seeks because his only crime is being Dostoevsky's target. But he can give Dazai pleasure that borders on it. He can do that.

"Here," he breathes when he pushes in the first finger, barely able to suppress a groan at the tight heat that welcomes him. It's been a while since he fucked someone. Half a year? Longer? He will have to focus to keep himself from finishing too early considering how tight his balls are. "Is that what you want?"

Before Dazai can give him any of his 'Is that what you call fucking?' crap, Chuuya adds a second finger. Maybe it's rushed. He doesn't know how long it's been since Dazai has bottomed either – or if he ever has – but. Dazai's walls clench around him and relax, accepting it with wordless enthusiasm.

Chuuya can't help the huff that escapes him. "And you call me desperate."

"You are desperate," Dazai responds; there is a breathless edge to his voice that makes Chuuya's guts twitch with the need to hear more.

"You're more desperate," he says and curves his fingers inside Dazai, dragging them towards himself until Dazai's hips twitch, and a smile spreads across Chuuya's face. "And I like it."

This time, Dazai's chest hitches too, the pupils in those all-seeing eyes swallowing all the color and the light.

Is that what he saw when he put that thing inside Chuuya to sleep that day on the roof?

"You've been so good to me." He aims for Dazai's prostate over and over, stimulating that raw bundle of nerves with every thrust of his fingers. "I think you deserve something nice for a change, too." Then he pauses to catch Dazai's bleary gaze and tip his head to the side, feigning innocence. "Don't you think so too?"

Dazai's eyelids flutter. They close. "No," he replies, voice brittle but even. "That's not what I think."

Something inside Chuuya's chest sinks, but he doesn't let it stop him from pushing inside Dazai again, with three fingers this time. Chuuya grants him a heartbeat to adjust before setting a new pace: hard and relentless, exactly what Dazai asked for, meaning that he doesn't bother to be precise this time, replacing accuracy with brutality. A pleasure that's tinged with punishment.

And Dazai takes it. He takes it well – head falling back against the bed, making all the right noises, hips twitching in time with the rhythm. He takes it so well that it feels more like a performance than actual pleasure.

Now Chuuya's not a human translator like Dazai; he can't tell that someone is lying by mere deduction, but he has *instincts,* and right now, his instincts are telling him that Dazai's currently in that head of his instead of being here, at Chuuya's mercy.

His fingers pull out so fast that it takes Dazai a moment to notice – a moment too long. When he does, his head lifts a little. "Finally worked up the nerve for the main act, huh?"

"Yeah," Chuuya says, preoccupied with his own cock as he gives himself several pumps that make his teeth clench, "you could say that."

Once he's ready, he shuffles over on his knee and considers the situation here. Then he grabs the back of Dazai's thigh and promptly lifts it over his shoulder.

Dazai squeaks out a noise of surprise. "I'm not that fle—"

"You'll manage." Straddling Dazai's other leg, it gives Chuuya the perfect access to line up his cock and slowly push forward. This time, Dazai's head doesn't just fall back – it drops like it's commanded by gravity. Because the angle is *deep.*

"Oh," Dazai stammers out, wriggling as Chuuya's cock slides even deeper. "Oh, heh…"

"Oh, indeed," Chuuya mocks and finds the outline of Dazai's jaw to pin him in place, not allowing him to look away this time. "Now look at me and *take it."*

He sees the exact moment that Dazai realizes that he's trapped in place with nowhere to go and no script to follow because the pace of Chuuya's hips isn't brutal or hard or fast, instead it's *precise.* Deep.

Pulsing. Every thrust brushes against places that make Dazai's eyes roll back in his head and it does that over and over and over. Not a single moment of respite.

And the untouchable, perfectly poised picture of Dazai Osamu slowly starts to unravel.

"Oh, okay, okay," Dazai babbles, flailing like he can't decide whether to shift or fist his hands in the sheet. "Wait, Chuuya. Just wait; just *oh* _"

Dazai's walls grip his cock so tightly that Chuuya knows that he has found the spot – but he doesn't give Dazai more, doesn't give him less either. He just continues to fuck him nice and steady all while forcing Dazai to look at him as he falls apart.

It's perfect.

It's devastating.

Now he just needs to –

"It's okay, Dazai," he rasps, holding onto the last threads of his stamina. "It's okay to just let go every once in a while. You can let go with me."

And the glimmer of Dazai's consciousness flickers out, giving way to the beast that's slumbering in the depth of those demonic eyes.

Dazai's hole flutter around him, pulling him in and Chuuya can't resist, making his hips fuck into him just a little bit faster until Dazai's clutching at his thighs, squeezing and pulling them, and the stream of noises coming out of his mouth becomes completely unintelligible.

"— okay, Chuuya, okay, I'm – I'm going to come; god, you're going to make me come, please make me come and stay here, just stay, don't leave –"

Chuuya can barely hear anything over the rush in his ears as he lets go of his restraint and chases the light beckoning him in. Dazai's walls are still squeezing him like they want to keep him locked away and inside by sucking his soul into him through his dick, and honestly, Chuuya wouldn't mind because it's heavenly, everything feels good, perfect, and then the knot inside him finally breaks and he gasps.

Burying himself in Dazai, he rides out his orgasm until his cock stops

twitching with the heat of his release. It takes him a good minute to realize Dazai's still babbling to himself, arms clutched tightly around Chuuya's neck as he squeezes him to his feverish body, damp with salt and sweat. *"Don't leave,"* he repeats senselessly, helplessly, over and over. "Don't ever leave me."

Chuuya's throat is thick with raw nerves, swallowing the equivalent of carving a path inside himself for something else to pass. "Never."

Where else is there to go? There is no one, nothing, but Dazai. Hungry, greedy Dazai who has been devouring Chuuya piece by piece for months now. But it's safe inside his belly. Warm.

"Never," he says again and presses that promise to the edge of Dazai's jaw, to his mouth, his cheek. "I promised. I promise."

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"No," Dazai says afterward and prevents Chuuya from slipping away with a snug clutch around his waist. "You're not allowed to leave me."

Even after all this time, Chuuya's first instinct is still to tense. He breathes out half a huff, half a laugh, slowly trying to relax again. "What, not even to piss?"

"No, not even to do that. Not now, and not ever."

Dazai's probably just messing around, but the last thirty minutes make Chuuya feel like there's a deeper meaning to his words. Sometimes people say stupid, senseless things when they are blind from pleasure. But here Dazai is repeating those words, reminding Chuuya of his promise. It's not like he has any plans to go any time soon. There is no place to go for him anymore. Dazai has to know that, right?

"You stayed earlier, so now you have to stay forever," Dazai mumbles like he can read his thoughts and snuggles even closer.

"That's not how these things work, you know," Chuuya murmurs back.

"It's how I work. I'll shatter into dust and die if you leave me."

Chuuya snorts. "That's a bit dramatic. And…" He pauses as his eyes flicker to the dim hallway and the door and the life outside of this bedroom. "We have to eventually go out there and face the music."

Making a whiny, muffled sound in his throat, Dazai shakes his head, the strands of his hair tickling Chuuya's neck.

He squirms a little. "It'll be all right. Kouyou and –"

"Shut up. I don't care."

"Dazai…"

"Shut that pretty little mouth of yours," Dazai repeats, a low warning in his voice, "or, I'll make you." Except that threatening Chuuya into silence by brushing his nose across his cheek and sucking the lobe of his ear between his lips is perhaps not the wisest idea.

Chuuya's too worn out from the last few hours to bring up the energy to get horny again, but he still hisses as Dazai sucks, and sucks, and sucks. It just feels so good. Dazai always makes him feel so good.

"I'm serious," he manages to breathe out after a moment. When that makes Dazai pause, release him completely, and roll around to face the wall, Chuuya has to swallow around the sudden silence between them. "Hey, if you really don't want to talk about it, I'm not going to force you, but we both know you'll have to face the music *eventually*." Sooner the better. Because the port mafia cannot spin their way out of this mess without Dazai.

The doleful sigh that he lets out sounds like he is already well aware of that. Just not happy about it.

Having no idea how to make it better, Chuuya places his palm on the bend of Dazai's arm. Dazai doesn't shake it off.

Several minutes pass until he speaks. "What's the point anymore? I will fail anyway. You might as well go on without me."

Chuuya has to stifle his laughter because this is a serious conversation about an even graver situation. It's just that Dazai sounds *so dramatic*. It's kind of adorable. But mostly heart-breaking. "You've had one setback. That doesn't mean that you can't outsmart Dostoevsky."

"…"

"You're Dazai Osamu, for god's sake. Of course you'll outsmart him."

"I won't. I'm not good enough."

"You're *brilliant."*

“Not brilliant enough.”

“That’s just not true.”

“It is. I have had a feeling for a long time now, but now I have proof of it too.”

“What kind of feeling?”

“My brain,” Dazai tells him, completely serious. “It is rotting inside my head. It has been rotting for a while now.”

Chuuya stares at the back of his skull, dumbfounded. “What’s that even supposed to mean?”

Dazai rolls onto his back and poignantly rests his arm over his face. “It means that I already used up all my smart potential. From here on out, it'll only get worse.”

“Why in the world would you think such a thing?”

“Because I can see it!” Dazai snaps, uncovering his eyes only to shoot him an aggravated glare like *Chuuya* is the one being unreasonable. “Everybody else can see it too! Dostoevsky does! They all know that I’m slowly disintegrating into… a mundane, stupid nobody.” Puffing out a breath, he flicks his fingers over himself. “All I am is just a pretty face now. That’s it.”

This time, Chuuya’s too late, and the laugh in his chest is too abrupt. He clamps his mouth shut as soon as it’s out though, especially when Dazai looks at him like he is about to murder him. “You dare laugh at my misfortune?”

“I’m not laughing. I’m not –” Chuuya holds up his hands and shakes his head as Dazai’s expression turns from offense to sheer disappointment. “I swear, I’m not. I just… you’re not just a guy with a pretty face.” He finally manages to sound serious again; his face softens the longer he looks at Dazai’s grumpy glare. “And you’re not turning any less brilliant either, Dazai. You’re just… human, and sometimes humans make mistakes and fail to see the traps that are set for them. That’s all.”

But Dazai is apparently set on believing in his theory. “You couldn’t possibly understand but I’m telling you. My brain is falling apart as we speak.”

“You don’t just suddenly turn less smart from one day to another.”

“You do if you have a neurodegenerative disease. Ever heard of Huntington's, Chuuya?”

“Do you have a neurodegenerative disease?”

“No, but –”

“Then why are we still talking about this?”

Dazai’s body goes limp. He shrugs weakly and lets out a sigh of defeat. “You might not like to accept it but you will have to eventually. I am no longer fit to lead the port mafia.”

At a loss for words, Chuuya just stares at him. How the hell do you convince someone that they don’t have to give up just because of one mistake? Then again, the better question is how the hell does someone grow up thinking that not being flawless disqualifies them from being human? What kind of things has Dazai been told during his life to end up with such impossible standards for himself?

“The question is what happens now,” Dazai continues to grumble himself, though that line of thinking makes him toss his head back and groan. “I am incapable of even thinking of a replacement!”

“How about you just take a little break? Think it over for a night… or two?” Kouyou will kill him when she hears about this, but to be fair, it’s better than telling her that Dazai resigned or something as equally drastic as that. Besides, Chuuya can only begin to imagine the sheer stress Dazai has been under since he took over the organization. Of course he’s exhausted. He deserves a break. The timing is horrid but he deserves it. He does.

All of a sudden, Dazai’s head snaps to him. His eyes go all wide and sparkly as he gapes at Chuuya and says, “I’ve got it! *You* take over!”

A startled sound slips past Chuuya’s lips. “Hah?”

“You,” Dazai exclaims and grabs his arm to raise it to his mouth and press a kiss there. “Wonderful, clever, dutiful Chuuya. You make the perfect candidate for the position of the boss!”

“I absolutely do not.”

“Of course you do.”

“Okay, I believe you now. You’ve gone insane.”

“Even better. Acceptance is always the first step towards growth. See? You’re perfect.”

“Dazai! There are a dozen other people that are far more suitable to take over that damn job!”

“Who?”

“Kouyou. Piano Man. Albatross. The Colonel –”

Dazai waves him off. “No, I’d rather take my pick with you.” Grinning, he leans closer to Chuuya and conspiratorially whispers, “See, I trust none of them as much as I can trust you. You are the only one, Chuuya. The one and only.”

“You can’t,” Chuuya hisses through clenched teeth. “Your people will start a fucking riot when we have a war to focus on!”

“*Your* people,” Dazai corrects as calmly as a frozen lake. “They are now yours as much as they were mine.”

“No.”

“Yes. You swore, Chuuya. Remember?” And now Dazai’s voice has a cutting edge to it, leaving Chuuya wide-eyed and breathless as he stares back at him. “You went down on one knee and vowed to do whatever it takes to protect me. So do it. Protect me by doing this for me.”

Snarling, Chuuya rams his hand into the pillow. “That’s not fucking fair.”

“Life’s not fair, twinkle toes. The sooner you learn, the better.”

As if Chuuya needs any lessons on fairness.

“Do you really want to destroy your own damn organization over this one setback that you had?! Is that the kind of man that you are?”

“It’s exactly the kind of man that I am. So why should I be the leader, hm?”

“Because it’s *not* who you are, that’s just it! You built the port mafia to the way it is now. You put your entire blood into it. You sacrificed so many people — so much of yourself. It had to be all for some reason!

So why don't you think about that for a second and remember what that reason was before you commit something you'll regret!"

But the point that Chuuya was so desperate to make ricochets off Dazai like it's nothing. The grin on his face grows even wider. He flops back down on the bed, and Chuuya knows that this is it. If there was any chance of convincing him otherwise, it's now gone.

"You care about the port mafia whether you want to admit it or not," Dazai says, facing the wall. "So either you do this or you let one of the other executives take over. But we both know what will happen if they do."

"You…!" Chuuya trails off because it's no use arguing with someone as stubborn as a brick. Instead, he gets out of bed and picks up his clothes from the floor, mulling this entire thing through as he steps into his pants. Once he is dressed, he turns to look at Dazai, but he is not treated with the same respect in return. Dazai's eyes remain closed even when he speaks. "I'll ask Kouyou to do this with me. *For the time being."*

Because this isn't a permanent solution. Chuuya won't replace Dazai as the damn boss of the port mafia. Nor does he want to. That wasn't his goal when the plan was to ruin this organization still, and it isn't his goal now.

Dazai hums airily. "Whatever floats your boat, boss. You're calling the shots now."

"And what the hell are you going to do in the meantime?"

"I'm just going to lie here until I wither away."

Chuuya shakes his head. There's a vast array of emotions blinding him: anger, irritation, confusion, frustration. The whole damn spectrum of negativity. And yet, it's something akin to concern that makes his feet move. That makes him squat down in front of Dazai and grab his face until the bastard looks at him.

"At least get some rest," he says. Now that Dazai can, he should get as much of it as possible.

Dazai blinks at him before huffing out a laugh, more air than honesty. "I'd have to keep you here for that to happen and seeing as I just made you do something else… you're out of luck."

How ironic that they only manage to sleep through the night or through the day when they're with each other. How sad that they still so rarely accomplish that.

"Just rest," Chuuya murmurs and rises back to his feet with a breath. "I'll come to check on your sorry ass as soon as I can."

"How kind of you, boss."

He's already too far gone for Dazai to hear the *shut up*.

The office is empty. It takes Chuuya half an hour to track down Kouyou in one of the board rooms. After getting off the phone, she sees him, and by the way her mouth is set, she knows what he is going to say before he says it.

"Nothing?" she asks. "Have you tried everything?"

"He refuses to come back at the moment," Chuuya tells her, settling against the desk and rubbing the spot next to his brow. Even though he spent the last few hours in bed, his body is already begging to spend another few there — to actually sleep. But that is a luxury he cannot afford right now. "So we decided that we —" He gestures between the two of them. "-- will take over for the time being. Just until Dazai…" He clears his throat. "… feels better."

"And how does he plan to explain that to the rest of his people?" Kouyou turns her gaze to the pages of documents in her hands, stacking them on top of each other. "In the middle of a war, no less?"

And that…

That Chuuya has thought about.

"We'll say the boss is sick. That Dostoevsky did something to him."

Kouyou pauses to look at him, eyes narrowing. "That's a risky move, Chuuya-kun. It will make Dazai seem weak. You must have realized by now that power is as much about appearances as it is about actual numbers."

"It would make him seem weak if he actually died from Dostoevsky's attack which he *didn't,"* Chuuya says with a shrug. "He's just recuperating. And it will give the entire port mafia an incentive to fight harder. Remind everyone that we have a common enemy and that's Dostoevsky and his mob of religious murderers. Not Dazai."

“Like I said,” Kouyou places the stack of documents on the shelf by the wall, “it’s risky. But perhaps just what we need if we play our cards right.” Then her eyes land on Chuuya. “What should our first order of business be then, Chuuya-kun?”

“The Armed Detective Agency.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to all lovely and wonderful people who have read this far and left me comments, kudos and/or curiouscat questions! I love this fic to pieces already, but you guys make it even more enjoyable <3

Also, check out this wonderful alit Dazai art I commissioned from Lily <3

Next we have:
- an agreement
- an attempt
- a promise

Chapter 32: Heavy Is the Head

Chapter Notes

Warnings: suicide attempt.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The same day, Kouyou arranges another meeting with the Armed Detective Agency. Given that they didn't part on the best of terms last time, Chuuya already has a few incentives at hand to make them bend, but Kouyou's personal relationship with the agency's doctor, Yosano Akiko, gives them an in.

It's fascinating – Kouyou's willingness to sacrifice her personal attachments for the port mafia at the drop of a hat. Terrifying, too. The Chuuya who grew up alongside his sheep couldn't have done that. It wasn't the organization that mattered most to him but the people that made it up. He wonders if that has changed now.

Is he willing to sacrifice Dazai for the sake of the port mafia?

No.

It's still *someone* that holds the other end of his loyalty. Dazai is the head of this organization, which binds Chuuya to both, but it's only Dazai that he knelt before. Dazai who Chuuya swore loyalty to. Dazai. Not the port mafia.

"I'm going to cut straight to the chase," he says as soon as the president of the agency arrives at their meeting spot with the doctor by his side; they are in an empty warehouse that's on the cusp of mafia territory, bordering the neutral city zone. "*Dostoevsky*, not Rodion or Raskolnikov, has you all fooled. That it happened isn't your fault – he fooled me once too, and a lot of people died because of it." Chuuya's nostrils flare as he stares down the silver-haired man across from him. "But it's your responsibility to wake the fuck and realize that the man's playing you, especially when you're calling yourself the good guys."

The president's face is a blank sheet of paper. Even worse than Dazai's – who, at least, cloaks it in sparkling charm. The expression gazing back at Chuuya is impenetrable though.

"So you've told us before, but the evidence paints a different picture."

“The evidence is altered, for fuck’s sake. A grainy picture that anyone could have edited and a bunch of documents that Dostoevsky might as well have pulled out of his ass is all you have.”

“And do you have proof of that?”

“Not yet, but that’s why we’re here.” Chuuya taps his wrist with one finger. “One month. We’ll give you *one* month without touching Dostoevsky – although I’m sure you understand why he’ll have to remain in our captivity during that time,” he adds. “We’ll use that month to provide the necessary evidence that you’re buying into the make-belief story of a con artist – or better yet, use that time to do some research yourself. Detectives are supposed to be good at that, no?”

“Are the terms clear or not?” Kouyou asks.

“Mn. They’re clear,” the president answers without even blinking once. “What’s not clear to me is your credibility.”

Chuuya’s fingers clench into fists. “We’re here, unarmed and proposing a deal instead of running your agency down to the ground as we could have –”

“That,” Kouyou cuts in, “and we remember the favor that we owe you.”

“Yes,” Chuuya admits despite the way his chest clenches at that. “The point is we didn’t have to have this conversation, but our boss values the relationship he has with your agency and doesn’t want to lose it to a fraud like Dostoevsky.”

A pause.

Then the president nods. “All right then.” The doctor’s eyes flicker to him in surprise, though she doesn’t raise any protests. Not in front of the port mafia, at least. “A month, but no longer. You will have to provide us with proof that Dostoevsky is well taken care of for the time being.”

When Chuuya doesn’t respond, too annoyed by the fact that after everything that’s happened he will have to make sure that *Dostoevsky* of all people will ‘be taken care of’, Kouyou replies in his stead. “Of course.”

That concludes their meeting without even a single drop of bloodshed

— just the way Dazai wanted it. Too bad he isn't doing much listening these days.

"That went well," Kouyou says after they climb inside the car that's going to take them back to the headquarters.

"Yeah, sure." Looking out of the window, Chuuya clicks his tongue. "That was the easy part. Now we'll actually have to get evidence."

"I assume you already have something in mind."

He takes a breath before meeting her expectant gaze. "We're going to gather the best tech team there is out there, so they can figure out what's up with the eye prosthetics once and for all."

She takes a moment to let that decision register before nodding approval. "The Agency mentioned a book before. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you, Chuuya?"

"No," Chuuya mutters, already waving that direction away, "whatever book they speak of doesn't matter. It's just a bunch of lies that Dostoevsky strung together to make up that idiotic accusation."

"Very well," Kouyou says with a hum and folds her hands together, the picture-definition of a predator in disguise. "I will find ourselves the best computer-savvy people in the country then."

She has been surprisingly docile these last two days, going along with Chuuya's suggestions without pushing back — not like she does with Dazai — and letting him take the whole most of the time.

It's a test, he thinks. Kouyou's trying to see something, but what exactly? Chuuya's ability to execute this undeserved and temporary position? This would mean that she doesn't consider it a transitional arrangement — which it very much is. Dazai might be dramatic right now, but that can't last. He is too much of a control freak to let anyone but him run the port mafia. It's insane.

But it's the only thing that explains Kouyou's generous cooperation and faith in Chuuya. The woman cares about the organization, more than anyone else, but she doesn't want to run it. At least, not officially. Her style is to pull the strings behind the curtain.

Kouyou's vision for the future is worrying but so is everything else. Once Dazai returns, it won't matter anyway, so Chuuya pushes the question marks away and focuses on the present.

Although the plan is better than having nothing at all, *for now*, it doesn't erase all of their problems. Dazai's still hiding away in his bedroom, only ever letting anyone come in if it's Chuuya – and only if Chuuya agrees to warm his bed, but under no circumstance talk about what's happening outside his cave of isolation. And there is the rest of the port mafia.

The entire lower rank, which makes up the majority, doesn't matter. Whether they think the organization is moving in the right direction or not has no significance whatsoever. They're grunts. Foot soldiers. The bottom of the food chain, as Kouyou once put it.

However, the upper echelons – the small percentage of ability users, masterminds, and executives that represent the port mafia's force *do,* and boy, do they have a lot to say in the absence of the boss.

The small circle of people who are aware of the situation about the Detective Agency has decided it's best to keep it a secret as long as possible. The only thing that people need to know is that Dazai is currently recovering and that to defeat Dostoevsky, they have to defeat the Bishop's Staff. Doing one without the other is impossible.

They have a lot to say about that too, especially because Dostoevsky's still in his cell, *untouched.* But the disapproval that's brewing in the port mafia hallways has not boiled over yet, not enough to endanger the boss by acting too immaturely with Dostoevsky.

When it happens, it's a random Tuesday afternoon, two weeks later.

Chuuya's strolling inside Dazai's apartment after a gruesome four-hour strategy meeting, stripping off clothes as he goes since the man has been rather ravenous these last few days.

"I swear to god, if I have to hear one more word out of that man's mouth, I'll kill him myself," Chuuya mutters, kicking his shoes off half-heartedly. His eyes lift to the empty bed when no one responds to his complaints.

Sighing, he shrugs off his shirt and heads to the bathroom. "Dazai? I need a fucking bath. Or a fucking fuck. Either way, I need…" His words trail off into a stunned silence.

The room is empty.

It looks empty due to the eerie silence in the air, but an abandoned pile of clothes lies on the floor — *Dazai's* clothes — and the tub is

filled not only with water but with ice cubes and –

It takes Chuuya several precious seconds to realize that Dazai is inside the tub as well.

That he's underwater.

And as soon as that realization dawns on Chuuya, it shatters his confusion into a million tiny pieces.

"Dazai!" He crouches next to the tub and reaches inside within seconds. A hiss of pain rushes through his clenched teeth when his hands break through the water. It's freezing cold. So cold that it hurts. And Dazai –

Dazai is even colder.

Chuuya gets a hold of his slick, numb body inside the water, loops his arms under Dazai's armpits, and starts dragging him out. It's the hardest thing he's ever done in his life. He's not weak. He's physically fit and strong and apt, even without his ability, but Dazai's tall and stiff and by the time his body hits the floor with a sickening thud of dead weight, Chuuya is panting with exertion. His fingers trembling. His lungs heaving. His mind racing.

Dazai's skin has turned into an unhealthy shade of whitish blue.

"Dazai?" he croaks out, leaning down to hear if he is breathing.

He isn't.

One time several years ago during the height of summer, the sheep spent a day at a lake in the neighboring town. There was that kid who went inside the water drunk and didn't get out of it. Chuuya saw people do compressions to get him back. He's also seen it in a few movies. Heard about it.

Now, as he places his hands over Dazai's chest, he wishes he had just stopped for ten minutes during the last thirteen years of his life to actually learn how to do it *right.* Because the difference between watching someone else do it and doing it yourself is life and death.

"Dazai, I swear to god if you –" His voice breaks. So do Dazai's ribs. Chuuya hears them crack under his fingertips — an ugly, terrible sound that makes his face wince with each press but that doesn't stop him, never does it stop him, because if he stops –

Then that means that Dazai's dead, that he has spent too much time in that cold water, that Chuuya was too late, and that *can't* happen.

"You can't fucking die, you hear me?" Chuuya shakes his head. Something warm and wet rolls down his cheeks. "You *can't.* Not after you've dragged me into this life. You can't. You *promised* you'd be there, you…"

29.

30.

"You can't."

Like a chant, he keeps repeating these words, even as he leans down to tilt Dazai's head and lift his chin to breathe life back into his wretched lungs. But his chest remains still, his lips cool save for the drop of salt that falls from Chuuya's blurry eyes and aimlessly shatters against his lifeless skin.

You can't.

"You fucking bastard," he snarls and pushes down on his ribs harder. "Don't you *dare.* Don't you fucking dare do this. I'll kill you, I'll strangle you with my own two hands, I'll do anything – just *come back!"*

He doesn't know how long he kneels there, snapping Dazai's chest apart until every push sounds like a death sentence, but it's when Chuuya draws away from his mouth the third time that it finally sinks in.

Dazai is dead.

Dazai killed himself.

And just for one terrible, selfish second, all Chuuya thinks about is how he never even told Dazai that he loved him.

He spent so much time denying that truth that he only buried it deeper and deeper. Until it was tangled in his pulse. Beating through him like a second heart. Sometimes it raced; other times it was slow and steady; mostly it was just there. Sitting in his chest and keeping him alive. It became such a profoundly normal part of him that Chuuya didn't feel the need to acknowledge it. So he loved that man. So what? Perhaps Dazai didn't return the feelings; maybe he did — it

didn't matter because Chuuya's fate was sealed. He would spend the rest of his life by Dazai's side in one way or another. It didn't need to be *uttered.*

Except that Dazai is *dead* and Chuuya never even said –

Dazai gasps.

A real, self-created, explosive gasp from a chest that is *rising* –

And falling again.

"— I love you."

Dazai's lashes flutter. He takes several gulping breaths, expression twisting into a pained wince as he pats his chest and lifts his wavering gaze to Chuuya. "Wh…what?"

Frozen to the bathroom floor, Chuuya stares at him. And stares. And stares.

"Ouchy," Dazai mumbles, head dropping back against the white tiles. "…hurts."

And Chuuya's face breaks. "You… sick piece of shit. What the hell?!" His hands curl in the sodden collar around Dazai's, yanking him up from the floor. "What *the fuck* is wrong with you?"

"What's… wrong with me?" Dazai grumbles and miserably fails to push Chuuya away from him. "What's wrong with… you? First, you break my ribs… now –"

"I was saving your fucking life!"

"Yeah… thanks for that… didn't ask you to…"

"Oh, *my bad.* Was I supposed to just let you *die?!"*

Dazai's hand blindly pushes against Chuuya's face until he lets go of him. "So loud… and for what…?"

"I'm actually going to strangle you. What the hell were you thinking? *Why* –" But behind that downpour of anger and fury and betrayal, there is something much more sickening. Guilt. Dazai had told him how he felt, and Chuuya just –

He didn't listen.

He shrugged it off.

He left Dazai to rot alone in his cave.

And now…

Now he's looking at the outcome of that decision.

"I'm sorry," Chuuya whispers, and his hands curl in Dazai's shirt again but this time, it's to have something to cling to as he lowers his head to the ground, shaking his head.

Dazai's body and his voice begin to tremble. "You should be… my headache's already b-bad enough."

That is not what Chuuya is seeking forgiveness for, but the knot that has tied itself around his vocal cords is too tight to voice that right now. Instead, he unfolds himself from Dazai to grab a handful of towels from the rack and wrap them around his sopping, shivering shoulders.

Dazai accepts the gesture with a deep sigh, eyes falling closed.

"You need to get out of your clothes," Chuuya tells him. "You'll get… sick."

"That's all… right, Chuuya… everything worked out perfectly…"

Dazed, he stares at Dazai.

His eyes flutter open a moment later and meet Chuuya's. His lips are too cold and stiff to form more than a weak attempt of a smile but the sheen of thrill that shines through is startlingly real. "I'm all b-better now… I know what to do…. Against Dostoevsky… against the Bishop's Staff… against everyone…"

"What are you talking about? You just…" Chuuya weakly gestures at him, not knowing how to say *you just attempted to commit suicide* without uttering the words because even thinking them hurts too much.

"I just restarted… my brain into action," Dazai murmurs, gazing somewhere off into a place that Chuuya cannot see. "There's… no better view than at the rock-bottom of it all." And then he shrugs breezily, just like that, and says, "Anyways, we've… ah, gosh… we've wasted enough time here. Let's go… back to work, shall we?"

No, Chuuya wants to say. *We can't go back to work because you tried to kill yourself — and you would have succeeded if I hadn't dragged you out of that fucking tub.*

And *how can you just act like everything is okay?*

And *what about me? What about the promise you made to me? How could you just leave like that?*

As with his voice, the words get stuck somewhere at the bottom of his throat, too far down below to see the light of the day.

And Dazai –

He somehow pushes himself upward, wincing and groaning under his breath as he does, but not letting the pain of his cracked ribs keep him from waddling out of the bathroom and leaving Chuuya behind, still on the wet floor, still staring at the spot where he almost lost him.

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Chuuya used to think that he was decent at handling all kinds of situations. Those were the skills he had to nurture growing up on the streets as the leader of a youth gang. The port mafia obviously requires a different approach most of the time, but he adapted as well. Not everyone here loves him, but he has done okay for himself.

But for the life of him, he can't figure out what the hell he's supposed to do with *this*.

"Ah! There it is. Finally," Dazai mutters to himself as he flips through one of the twenty folders that surround him at his desk. "I know I gave you the reins and all, but you could have at least tried to keep things in order. Leadership and bureaucracy go hand in hand, Chuuya darling."

Hovering on the threshold of Dazai's apartment, Chuuya doesn't answer. He doesn't have to. Dazai is already onto his next mission before either of them can blink, searching for documents and mumbling things that have no meaning to anyone but himself.

That is how Dazai has spent the last eight hours of his day ever since he took that gasping breath on the bathroom tiles.

He threw himself into work, saying he has 'seen it all' and now has a plan to defeat all their enemies all while ignoring the fact that his ribs

are broken and that he –

A searing pain engulfs Chuuya's throat as the image flashes into view again.

That he tried to fucking *kill himself*.

Dazai may be able to pretend it didn't happen, but Chuuya isn't.

Every time he so much as closes his eyes, he sees Dazai lying there. Cold and stiff and lifeless. He hears his ribs crack over and over. He feels the warm salt of his tears rolling down his face — the only thing that wasn't ice.

And every time Chuuya turns away, his heart starts slamming so wild against his chest that it makes him sick with panic, terrified that Dazai will climb into another bathtub when he stops watching.

So here he stands. Not able to indulge Dazai in his antics, but not able to walk away either.

When Gin enters the office carrying more documents, Chuuya's lungs fill with dizzying relief. They hand over the folders along with the latest developments. Dazai is so entranced by his stupid paperwork that he doesn't even notice Chuuya jogging after Gin once they turn to leave again.

"Wait a moment." He keeps his voice low and his gait casual as they make their way out. "Can you stay with the boss for a few hours?" he asks them, jerking his thumb back to where they left Dazai. "I need to run a few errands and I'd prefer if he weren't alone."

The Mafiosi stationed outside the office are fine and well but they would be useless if Dazai decided to take another damn ice bath, or something even worse. Meanwhile Gin is not only his secretary and a trained assassin, but also the closest thing Dazai has to a friend. They would notice if he started acting strange.

Just like they notice that there is more to Chuuya's request than just Dazai's physical safety — and are smart enough not to voice it. "Sure, I can do that."

"Thank you," Chuuya says, pressing a palm to his eyes. "Really. Call me if anything's up, yeah?"

"Yes, Nakahara-san. Of course."

Chuuya has no destination in mind when he escapes the suffocating confines of this damn office with shaky legs. He just wants out. To be somewhere else. To breathe without feeling like the roof is going to collapse on him.

Somehow he ends up in his penthouse.

It's been a while since he's been here. More than a month.

The last time he was it was shortly before the port mafia boarded the aircraft and spread across the sky; Chuuya had been sitting on his bed and staring at the bag that he once packed when he thought he would be leaving with the sheep soon. And he sat and stared and stared and stared until Dazai eventually came to pick him up, shoving the bag away and filling his vision with himself and his promise and their shared mission.

When the hell has this life turned into an endless myriad of tragedies?

Where does it *stop*?

The penthouse looks the same as the day he left it behind without looking back, just –

The sudden sound of a crash and muffled laughter makes Chuuya stop in his tracks, turning to the source of the noise only to see Yuan, wrapped up in nothing but white bed sheets, with her arms around Albatross…

Chuuya's gaze wanders lower before he can stop himself.

There are no bed sheets covering *his* body.

"Oh my god," someone says — either him, pointedly casting his head heavenward, Albatross reaching for the sheets, or Yuan, who is trying to stop Albatross from flashing Chuuya with both of their bodies.

He opens his mouth to say something, apologize perhaps, but then a third voice comes from the guest room, one he doesn't recognize: "Are you guys coming? I'm feeling somewhat abandoned."

Chuuya's eyes almost bulge out of his skull.

"What are you doing here?" Yuan says at the same time as Albatross shouts, "Just a minute!"

"I live here," Chuuya exclaims. "You couldn't find a place of your own

to have a damn threesome?!"

"You haven't lived here for *weeks,"* Yuan snaps, and the razor-sharp edge in her voice makes Chuuya look at her after all — even at the risk of seeing things he has no wish of seeing. But any awkwardness or humor in the room drains away the moment their eyes meet. There are too many unspoken words between them and they all hang in the air, impossible to ignore anymore.

Albatross is the first to break the uncomfortable silence by clearing his throat. "Um, I'd like to give you guys a moment but…" He pointedly gestures between him and Yuan. "I would like to do that without flashing Chuuya-kun…"

"Right." Yuan doesn't look at Chuuya, glaring at the sheets like they are responsible for this situation before nodding. "Let's just…"

"I'll go," Chuuya says to make matters easier. "To the kitchen," he adds when he sees the flash of hurt in Yuan's eyes.

Having this conversation is the last thing he wants to do right now, but he can't leave. Not again. And he doesn't know where else to go without crumbling apart like a broken puppet either. So the lesser evil it is.

In the kitchen, he scans the fridge for anything edible but settles on a cup of coffee. His stomach is too tied up in knots to accept food. The machine works, filling the silence that has settled over the apartment with the noise of grinding coffee beans and hot milk dripping into an empty cup until someone clears their throat behind him.

Chuuya looks over his shoulder as Yuan settles against the kitchen bar, her grim expression mirroring the tight feeling in his chest. He waits for his coffee to finish before settling across from Yuan. Neither of them is in a hurry to begin the conversation.

"Coffee?" he eventually asks when the silence becomes unbearable, raising his cup.

Yuan shakes her head. "No, thanks."

He nods and waits a few moments before he asks, "Who's third-wheeling you?"

Yuan's gaze lifts to him like she can't quite believe that this is what he chooses to start with, but she answers with a shrug and a, "Shion.

She's part of the interrogation unit."

"Ah. I didn't meet a lot of the other members but I can imagine –"

"What are you doing here?" it bursts out of Yuan, her eyes wide and desperate as she stares at him in the exact way he imagined she would.

"I've been busy, but I do still live here."

"*Busy,*" she echoes. "I've been busy too, Chuuya. We all are. But that never made me act like you don't exist."

"I don't –" He shakes his head as the words snag in the back of his throat. "That's not what I've been doing."

"Really? Then explain to me how it's possible that I wake up one day, with all my friends *dead –"* Chuuya flinches. "— and the only one who was still alive pretended I died that day too." She slams both of her hands down on the counter between them, making his cup of coffee tremble. "You didn't even show up to the funeral! I had to *bury* them on my own." He flinches again. "The worst fucking day of my life and you didn't bother to show up. You were *that* busy?!"

And again.

"I…" He *was* there. He saw all of their twenty-five graves. He had to bury the grief somewhere before it buried him, just like it's trying to do right now, but he did all of that from a distance. It wouldn't have been fair to take up that space on the grave site next to Yuan. It wouldn't have been right to stand there and mourn the people who died because of *him.*

"You *what?"* Yuan's screeching tone yanks him out of his head and into the present nightmare. "What is it that you want now? What are you doing here?" And when she doesn't get an answer: "What are you doing here? What are you doing here? What are you doing here?"

"I don't fucking know, okay!"

"What are you doing here?!"

"Stop asking me that! I don't know!"

"Figure it out then, damn it!"

"Guys," Albatross suddenly chimes in from behind. Next to him is a

young woman — Shion, Chuuya assumes, her hair pulled into a skin-tight high braid on her head as she glances at Yuan with a look of concern. “How about we –” Albatross clearly stops himself from saying the words *calm down* with a wince. “— take a second to breathe –”

“I don’t want to fucking breathe. I just –” Yuan’s teeth bare, fingers curling into fists, and she physically restrains herself from lunging at Chuuya. She ends up hissing out a breath and stalking away without saying a word.

Albatross blinks, eyes darting from Chuuya to where Yuan has just disappeared to.

“I’ll make sure she’s okay,” Shion offers, following her after Albatross replies with a grateful nod.

Chuuya’s lips press together in the silence that follows. He listlessly lifts his coffee but ends up turning and pouring it down the drain. There is enough acid in his stomach.

“Dude,” Albatross says eventually. “Are you okay? You look a little pale.”

Chuuya replies with a blank stare.

Albatross sighs and scratches the back of his neck. “Okay. Stupid question. How about…” He walks around the counter to the cabinet that’s stocked with liquor, has been since the day he moved in, and grabs a bottle of red wine. After a moment of hesitation, he grabs a bottle of whiskey too.

They get placed in front of Chuuya accompanied by a silent invitation that Chuuya accepts a few seconds later. He didn’t plan on getting drunk tonight but then again, he didn’t foresee having to resuscitate Dazai from death’s doorstep and have a screaming match with Yuan either. Life is full of surprises, and none of them ever bother to announce themselves.

Albatross pours both of them two glasses and takes a sip. “Sorry for fucking in your apartment.”

Chuuya massages his browbone. The liquor running down his throat is scorching hot, taming the chill that has made itself at home in his chest but fueling the headache behind his eyes. “I don’t care what you guys do here,” he mutters. “It’s not like Yuan was wrong. I barely

spend time here."

"Speaking of, how is the boss doing?"

Chuuya's fingers start rubbing harder. Apparently, he does a bang-up job of hiding that.

"Dang. That bad?"

"He's okay," Chuuya forces himself to say, unfolding himself from the counter and taking his drink with him as he walks to the living room, staring out at the city behind the windows. How small — how insignificant everything looks from up here.

Albatross joins him, though he stays a few feet away, leaning against the wall.

Chuuya's chest is exploding with the urge to talk about what happened. To ask Albatross whether Dazai has done something like this before. Whether Chuuya has been too caught up in his own pain to miss all the glaring warning signs, or whether the current conflict was a contributing factor.

But as much as it hurts to keep it to himself, it's not his to share.

As dehumanizing as it is to think about politics in this situation, Chuuya can't go around sharing such dangerous secrets about Dazai. Even to Albatross, Dazai's man for everything… at least, that's what he used to be. Dazai has been keeping everyone in his life at a safe distance. Everyone except for…

Chuuya.

Except for him.

"Everything's fine. I'm just tired, you know," he mutters and coughs out a bitter half-laugh. "This war, these people, these past weeks… and Yuan –"

"You've gotta understand her. You don't talk to her for weeks and then all of a sudden –"

"I understand her all right. Really. I get it."

"Good," Albatross wipes a hand over his forehead. "Because it's not my place to get involved in this or speak on her behalf but –"

“Yes, so just shut up about it.”

“All right, all right, and I get it, dude. All of this? It can get to you. There’s no shame in admitting that.”

Chuuya grunts in agreement before throwing the rest of his drink back and hissing softly. Whiskey isn’t his favorite — he’s always considered it a snob’s drink — but it burns, and right now anything that’s able to touch that paralyzing plague of numbness dominating his sense is good in his book.

“What was it like before Dazai was the boss?” he wants to know. “When you guys were still kids and not the echelons running this whole damn show?”

It’s a selfish request, but at least it bears fewer risks than asking other dangerous questions.

“Kids?” Albatross huffs. “I don’t know if *Dazai* was ever a kid, but I…” He shrugs. “I was just glad to have a job and enough money to feed myself. It was after the war, the economy was shit, and there were more orphans on the street than stray dogs, so the fact that I had a roof over my head and three meals a day was, like, the height of luxury to children back then.”

Chuuya’s memories of the first few years on the streets are blurry, at best, and odd bits of pieces, at worst, but he remembers enough to know what Albatross is talking about. The sheep were just one of many other groups of orphans and runaways that banded together to survive out there. Suribachi city was overflowing with starving, feral children. Many ended up turning to the mafia to survive.

He casts a glance towards Albatross. “Your parents. They died in the war?”

“No clue about my father, but my mom, yeah.” His smile has a strikingly different shape than the ones he usually flashes everywhere he goes. This one is small and intimate. Melancholic. “She was a military outpost nurse. Died in the attack on Tokyo.”

“I’m sorry,” Chuuya says, and tries to picture what she would have been like. Just as loud and eccentric as her son, or something entirely else?

“Nah, it’s all right. I'm sure wherever she is now, it's better than here.” Albatross lifts his gaze and grins at him. “She was an ability user too,

you know. She had this special connection to birds. Could make them do all kinds of crazy things."

Chuuya can't help but snort as he looks at him. "Is that where Albatross comes from?"

"Fuck. No one was ever supposed to figure that out."

"So it is?"

"It's a cool name. Much better than Charles, don't you think?"

Charles…

"I guess. Does Yuan call you Albatross in bed?"

The question slips out without his brain's permission, and Chuuya regrets it as soon as Albatross opens his mouth with a smirk.

"Actually, she calls me –"

"Never mind. I don't want to know."

"Hey, you asked."

"I know and I wish I hadn't."

"If it helps, I call her –"

"Don't want to know that either."

"Relax, loosen up a little." Albatross swings an arm around him and clinks their glasses together. "We're friends, right?"

"I don't know. Don't have many of them these days," he mutters under his breath. It must be liquor invading his system quicker than he anticipated.

But Albatross only sees the empty glass and sprints to the kitchen for refreshments. "You have the boss, don't you?" he says, pouring Chuuya a new one.

"Dazai is… Dazai."

Meaning that he is much more than a friend but at the same time the only friend he has.

“Now don’t get me wrong, I love that man. I have killed for him and I would die for him, but.” Albatross plants one hand on his hip as he shoots Chuuya a pointed look that Chuuya does not understand. “He’s, ya know, all broody and angsty and shit.” Then he jerks his chin towards Chuuya. “And so are you. For two people, that's a lot of angst. You need to add some light to your routine, man.”

Chuuya can’t even disagree; he just sighs and collapses onto the sofa. “Lemme guess. You’re supposed to be the light.”

“Exactly! Well actually,” Albatross makes a face, “Yuan’s best as your light, and I am best as the boss’s light but since Yuan and you aren’t on the best terms right now, we could switch it up a little.”

Chuuya scoffs softly, taking another swig of the whiskey. “And what pray tell are you supposed to do as my light?”

“Get you drunk — check! Brighten your mood… we’re still working on that.”

Whether inebriation is the solution to Chuuya’s shit mood, he doesn’t know. If anything, liquor tends to heighten the current of emotions — and the one dragging him along now is an endless tide of hypervigilance whether it’s the Bishop’s Staff, Dostoevsky, that thing inside him, or Dazai. It never *stops.* It keeps coming and coming and –

“Woah, and stop you from doing this right here,” Albatross says, tugging at Chuuya's glass and pointing at him. “No overthinking when Chuuya’s with Albatross. Just fun. Nice and easy.”

It’s absurd having to stifle his protests when the very reason he asked Gin to stay up there was so he could leave and do this. Have some time off from the depressing reality of his life. Distract himself. Breathe. And yet, it still takes discipline to reshape his rebuttal into reluctant acceptance. *“Fine.”*

“Huh. Somehow I thought this would be way harder. But anyways! Let’s turn up some music, and —” Fiddling with the remote of the flat screen on the wall, Albatross shoots him a questioning look. “You into sports? Soccer? Baseball? Basketball?”

“Anything’s fine.”

“Hm. Let’s see.” He flips through channels until he stops at the footage of a volleyball game. “These things don’t look it at first glance, but volleyball matches can be brutal, my friend.”

Chuuya's only ever seen beach volleyball and that looked nothing like the lightning-quick plays on the TV screen. But it's all the same to him anyway.

It's not the most interesting thing he has ever done but perhaps that's why Albatross' method of taking his mind off things proves so effective: watching those tiny figures somewhere on a volleyball court thousands of kilometers away is such a frivolous pursuit. So simple. So easy. Then there's the liquor of course. Chuuya switches to wine not long after but it warms his chest all the same. And when Albatross offers him a bump of the coke, Chuuya doesn't see why he should say no. At least that will sober him up somehow before he crawls back to Dazai at the end of the night.

Somehow their conversation ends up revolving around the past again. Albatross asks a question about Yuan here and there — and insists that it's nothing but curiosity and that their thing is totally casual — and Chuuya manages to steal a few bits and pieces about Dazai's childhood in the port mafia, or lack thereof.

"I never met the man myself. Back then, I was just a delivery boy. I only started taking over the good jobs years later, and by that time, Mori Ougai had taken over."

"But did you know that Dazai was his son?"

"Ehhh, not at that time, no. I just knew he had kids. A whole bunch of 'em. I never believed that one of them spent his days hanging out with us other rookies, acting like an insignificant grunt himself. But –" He shrugs. "— I wouldn't be surprised if it was a mission from his father, too. You know, gather information, pick out promising talents, report, that kind of stuff."

Chuuya rests his cheek in his palm. "Ever met any of his siblings?"

"No." And then he makes a face. "Well, maybe, but I wouldn't know it. Mori disposed of them pretty quickly after his ascension."

Dazai once told him that he had killed his siblings, in the same breath as revealing he even had ones. Chuuya wonders whether that Mori man made him do it. Murder his own siblings so he could take over the throne without any pushback from the heirs. He wonders whether that would eventually lead someone to fill a tub with ice, submerge himself in it, and wait for death to get him.

"That Mori guy." Chuuya shoots Albatross a frown. "Who exactly was

he to Dazai?"

The look that passes over his face is grim and fleeting, a shadow that eclipses the eternal sun beaming out of his ass for a moment. "No one really knows," he says with a shrug. "I guess his mentor. Dazai was something like his right-hand man as far as I know. Spent as much time by the man's side as you do by Dazai's."

Chuuya's frown deepens. "He was older though, right?"

There is no legitimate information about the former boss of the port mafia, only rumors, but he's pretty sure it's statistically impossible for the man to have been as young as Dazai. Those kinds of prodigies only ever come around once every decade.

"Yes," Albatross confirms, eyes trained on the volley match. "He was in his late thirties."

The period that they decide to leave this conversation at leaves a bitter taste in Chuuya's mouth, but perhaps that's just the wine.

The game ends, the bottles become less and less full, and the day outside turns into night. Chuuya bids farewell to Albatross when his eyelids start to grow too heavy to keep them open, making no excuses as to why he needs to pay the boss a visit instead of just tumbling into bed. Albatross probably never even expected him to sleep here anyway.

Dazai's office is clad in gentle darkness. The only source of lighting comes from the golden glow of the lamp on the wall that illuminates the two couches, the coffee table, and the chessboard between Dazai and Gin.

Gin greets him with a nod and a "Nakahara-san, good evening."

Dazai wordlessly refuses to acknowledge Chuuya when he takes a seat on the other end of Dazai's couch and watches the two of them trade strategic blows for a while, his head heavy, heart even heavier.

He's not sure how much time passes before they finish with Dazai winning, and Gin excuses themselves without much ado.

"Finally gathered enough courage to come back?" Dazai softly asks without looking up from the chessboard. "Gin has been running themself ragged to come up with reasons to stay here and look after me."

Chuuya didn't have a single flicker of doubt that Dazai wouldn't see through the excuse. All he held onto was the flimsy film of hope that Dazai would be merciful enough to indulge Chuuya anyway. And he did.

He is still here, alive and breathing.

When Chuuya blocks his vision by stepping in front of the chess board, Dazai lifts his eyes to him. Still watching him as Chuuya places one leg on each side of Dazai's until he's kneeling above his lap. Then he raises his hands to cup Dazai's cheeks — until their faces are so close that their foreheads are touching. Until they are breathing the same air.

"Thank you," he whispers, looking directly into the heart of the storm that goes by the name Dazai Osamu.

Dazai, of course, doesn't have to ask what he is being thanked for. He is too smart to do that. But there is still a glimmer of confusion in his open expression like he doesn't quite understand *why* Chuuya is thanking him for staying alive tonight.

A shuddering sigh leaves Chuuya. Closing his eyes, he slides his arms around Dazai's neck, tight, and buries his face in the intimate heat that their bodies create. "Thank you. But I will skin you alive if you ever do that again."

Dazai's fingers trace the curve of his spine. "Chuuya..." His breath comes out ragged and strained.

"I will kill you, I swear," Chuuya insists, refusing to let go. "I will ruin your goddamn life, Dazai."

"I'd like to see Chuuya try to hurt a corpse…"

It's a joke but it's enough to pull Chuuya away so he can direct the force of his death glare at him. "I am serious. *Don't you dare."*

"Chuuya…"

Again with his fucking name.

"Promise me," Chuuya demands with his palm against Dazai's chest.

"Chuuya –"

"No, promise me that you won't do that ever again."

“Chuuya, you are…” Dazai’s face is screwed into a pained wince, and his eyes flicker down to Chuuya’s hand before they return to his gaze. “… hurting me… a little.”

Chuuya’s first instinct is to let go and apologize for the pain he has caused him.

He doesn’t though.

He keeps it right where it is as he stares back at Dazai.

“It does, doesn’t it?” he murmurs, dazed by the rush of power that surges to his head.

The eyes that gape back at him blink. Just for a moment, the man under him looks startlingly young. A lost child trapped in the skin of an adult. “Yeah.”

“Now imagine that tenfold. A hundredfold. A millionfold.”

“Surely nothing can hurt that much,” Dazai croaks out, visibly burying the pain that Chuuya’s hand is subjecting him to.

“*Promise.”*

But Dazai lets out a wet exhale, eyes fluttering shut and then open again. “Even you can’t bully someone into living.”

“Watch me,” Chuuya whispers and increases the weight on Dazai’s ribcage. It must really hurt now because he feels it too. The pain. Like there are threads connecting the two of them, sending out the same signals whenever one feels something. “Promise. Me.”

“I can try.” Dazai shakes his head. “That’s all I can give you.”

“That’s not good enough.”

Dazai’s black eyes stare at him, startled to hear something he’s probably never heard tell him before, but that expression bleeds into something else before Chuuya can even drink it in — into something hazy, lips parting around a silent gasp.

It’s *pleasure,* Chuuya realizes. He’s crossed the threshold of pain and veneered into the territory of the perverse thrill that comes from agony. *Dazai’s getting off on it.* Not only that, but he’s getting off on letting Chuuya *kill* him slowly… while denying Chuuya the promise to live.

Nostrils flaring, he takes his hand off Dazai's chest.

The effect is instant.

Dazai's pupils shrink back to their normal size. His ragged cough comes as much from pain as it does from disappointment.

And yet Chuuya can't even get the flame of restless anger inside him to light up. Not here. Not now. All that's left inside him is the blue sorrow that gushes through his veins and trickles into his bones like beads of poison. He buries his face in the crook of Dazai's shoulder, holding onto him as tightly as it's possible to hold onto the blossoms of a dandelion when the wind lures them away.

"Please."

Fingers brush against his cheeks, wet with droplets of his own poison. "I'm so tired. Won't you let me rest…"

"No." It's so selfish. So cruel of him to take the one thing that Dazai must really want from this life. But Chuuya has something of his own that he wants more than anything else in this life. He can't let it go. Just like that. "I won't let you," he whispers, shaking his head. "I won't."

"You might not like what you get," Dazai says softly.

Chuuya's huff washes over Dazai's shoulder before he draws enough to look at him. "I don't care."

He sees those sharp wheels turn in Dazai's head, spinning and croaking and fuming like the decision to stay alive requires a hundred formulas. In the end, somehow, his hand cups Chuuya's face, and his eyes become steady. "Okay."

"Okay," Chuuya echoes numbly, blinking several times before it dawns on him. "Okay?" he asks to be sure. "Yeah?"

Dazai doesn't reply, only gazing back at him silently — but steadily. That is answer enough.

"Okay," Chuuya whispers, more to himself than Dazai. His chest sags in relief. His cheek rolls sideways, leaning into Dazai's palm and resting there when the weight supports him. "Okay."

Okay, okay, okay.

That is all he needs.

Just one simple *okay*.

Chuuya could spend the rest of his life drooling against Dazai's shoulder but he knows that it's causing him pain, so he climbs off him, takes his hand, and leads him to the bedroom where he tells him to sit.

"Open your shirt." When Dazai fails to suppress a wince, Chuuya takes over popping his buttons open. "Have you let a doctor take a look at it?"

Dazai makes a noise that could mean anything.

Chuuya's jaw ticks as he scans the odd patches of bruises spanning over his ribcage.

"I've dealt with busted ribs before. They'll heal."

"I'll call Doc first thing in the morning," Chuuya decides before tugging at the thread of the gauze that's wrapped around Dazai's chest. "Take these off. I'll change them for you."

He thinks he hears a mumbled, "so bossy" on his way to get new bandages.

The bathroom is all tidied up now, but Chuuya still pauses as he rakes his gaze over the crystal-white tiles. All he has to do is close his eyes to see it all again. Dazai's stiff body lying on the floor. Chuuya's foot hovers over the spot. Right there. So fucking still.

Dazai's always had this stillness about him. Sometimes Chuuya looks to his left only to see him staring into space, motionless. Is that what occupies Dazai's head at those moments? That exhaustion that Chuuya saw in his bleary eyes today — that utter detached from this world, this life? That resignation he has succumbed to?

Chuuya isn't going to pretend to be above it because he isn't. He knows — no, he thinks he knows what that it must feel like to have so much numbness caulking your veins that it's coming out of your mouth like a watered-down version of bile. But in the end, his emotions always get the best of him. Try as he might, something always pushes through to make him feel horribly alive. Sometimes it is grief, other times it is the stubborn determination to persevere. For a while now, it has been anger. So much anger that Chuuya has

forgotten what the rest of the human spectrum tastes like. But it's there, woven into his arteries, pulsing in time with his heartbeat and pushing his feet forward, forward, forwarding towards a terrible and distant future where his enemies are dead and his friends resting peacefully in the ground.

Somehow he had assumed Dazai had something to keep him going. He gave up on trying to find out what it was eventually, too busy reminding himself of his own compass, but he never even stopped to consider the possibility that Dazai had been adrift all this time. Hollow.

He forces out an exhale and moves to grab a roll of gauze and walk away.

Dazai's sitting in the same spot that he was left in, minus the bandages covering his torso. His bruises coincidentally overlap with the snake that's inked into his skin, making it look like the injury is a cause of his own doing — or, the snake's, though some might say they are the same thing.

Chuuya doesn't have much to say during the process of wrapping Dazai's ribcage, only breaking the familiar silence between them to ask whether it's too tight. The answer is always a quiet *no.* Once it's done, Chuuya instructs him to get into bed. Dazai must realize that Chuuya has no patience for defiance tonight, so he slips under the sheets that Chuuya lifts for him and settles in until he's comfortable — as comfortable as he can get with broken ribs, anyway — and doesn't complain about any of it even once.

That is until the lights go out, Chuuya climbs in next to him, and shifts closer so he can press his face against Dazai's shoulder, fingers skimming the length of Dazai's bare arm. He would prefer to be able to wrap himself around Dazai until there is no more space left, but given his injuries, that would only add to his pain.

Except that Dazai stiffens. All these times he tortured Chuuya with all his hugging and snuggling and whatnot, and *this* is what makes him hesitate.

"You don't have to," Dazai says, and Chuuya understands at once where this is coming from. "I don't need your pity."

Chuuya lets out a sigh that comes from his belly and doesn't fight the pull of the darkness. "I just want a good night of sleep. That's it."

And it works. Like a charm.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you guys are okay after this one...

The lovely Freya commissioned a painting of the scene at the end by @Lex_Dark on twitter and you should totally check it out!!!

Chapter 33: Meursault (Part I)

Chapter Notes

Warnings: mention of forced drug abuse

See the end of the chapter for more notes

„When are you planning to tell me what the *hell* we are doing here?"

"All in due time, Chuuya. All in due time ~"

By *here*, Chuuya means the dirt road their car is tottering and stumbling along, twelve hours after Dazai woke him up with wide, giddy eyes and told him that he needs to show Chuuya something *immediately*. Dumb, silly Chuuya, who thought Dazai meant something in, you know, *Yokohama*, and went along with it without thinking too much of it, and ended up in a jet plane taking them across the globe to a tiny commune in *France*. Meursault or something.

And now here he is, sweating, cursing under his breath, and glaring at the, admittedly breath-taking, vast fields of green leafy vines and the hardcore sun high above in the cloudless sky, paying for the mistake of indulging Dazai in his random whims.

"That's just it," he mutters, hands tightening around the steering wheel, "we don't *have* that time you keep talking about. We're in the middle of a war. Your people think you're sick. Why are we here?!"

Dazai, who changed into a plain and loose white shirt during their travels, looks unbothered in the passenger seat; the only baggage he's carrying is the breezy grin on his lips. "You said Kouyou had it handled, so I trust that she does. Now stop worrying for a second, and enjoy the nice weather, Chuuya darling."

Chuuya stifles a growl, but he can't stifle the need to slide his gaze sideways because Dazai not only looks unbothered, he also looks… gorgeous. Unfairly, exceptionally gorgeous. His body is free of any bandages — save for the ones fixing his ribs, and it gives him a striking air of openness usually hidden beneath dozens of layers — both figurative and literal. The wind has ruffled his hair back, a few odd strands sticking up and exposing his forehead. And that smile is not only featherlight but handsome, and –

Dazai meets his eyes with a knowing glint in his smirk. "See

something you like, dear?"

"Yeah," Chuuya turns his attention back on the road and clicks his tongue, "me running you over with this thing."

"Ah, your sweet words never fail to make me blush. Don't you agree, Hideo-kun, Todaki-chan?"

The two Mafiosi in the backseat have been in Dazai's security unit for too long by now to be fazed by his antics. All they do is smile polite smiles and nod, though amused grins must be buried somewhere under all that professional work attitude.

So Chuuya helps out. "They're as sick of your shit as I am, Dazai."

"Are they though?" Dazai quips back, stretching out his arms into the sky before leaning against the open window and resting his cheek in one hand. "A free vacation to France. A decent salary. An entertaining boss and his eye-candy husband. What more could an employee want?"

"A warning to pack some looser clothes, for starters," Chuuya says with a huff. "How much longer? I'm sure your employees would appreciate knowing how much longer they will have to endure this heat."

While Dazai was generous enough to pack a change of clothes for Chuuya — a pair of grey track pants and a loose-fitting white muscle shirt — he didn't extend the same kindness to the two bodyguards. Chuuya refused to part with his gloves back on the plane, but now, feeling the basking heat crawl inside of them too, he wonders whether he should have listened to Dazai's advice. Taking them off now is obviously unacceptable.

Dazai doesn't need even more reasons to flash him his silly smile.

"We're almost there," the bastard in question provides after fishing out his phone.

For once, it's not just something he says to get Chuuya off his back. A stone building appears in the distance, tiny from this point of view but growing more impressive in size once they get closer to it. That's when Chuuya also spots the sign near the entrance: *Illuminations* and a logo of a wine bottle next to it.

His frown deepens but he feels a flutter of curiosity as well.

Dazai swept him away to a winery in France in the middle of a war?

Just what the hell is he up to…

Dazai watches him and gives Chuuya no other choice but to scowl. He refuses to give the man any satisfaction whatsoever. No way in *hell.*

A tree-lined road through the fields leads them to the winery's main building, but Dazai directs him past the iron gates, the stonework walkways, and the topiary until they reach the actual vineyard and the more intimate area where three stone bungalows stand, one of them bigger than the others.

"There," Dazai says, nodding at a suitable parking spot and letting out a content sigh. "Here we are."

Chuuya cuts the gas before casting a glance at Dazai. "Yeah, and I still don't know what for. Care to tell me what's going on now?"

"You'll understand everything in a few minutes." Dazai turns to his security guards. "We'll need some privacy, so please stand guard outside of the house." Then he opens the door and climbs out and Chuuya has no choice but to follow him to whatever surprise he is leading them into.

As they walk up the brick stairs to the house side by side, Dazai bumps shoulders with him. "You might hate me for this, but I do believe that this is for the best, Chuuya. Really."

"Hah?" Chuuya's head snaps to him. "What the hell are you talking about?"

He tries to get Dazai to answer him with a grip around his wrist, but the door on top of the stairs opens before he gets an explanation; out come two men, both tall, both in their late thirties, both with long hair except that one is as black as ink and the other one's a rich golden-blond. Somehow they also wear identical expressions as their eyes land on Chuuya.

Two rueful smiles, the curve of them bittersweet and melancholic.

"Chuuya," he hears Dazai say next to him, closer than he seemed to be before, "meet the two men that freed you from the laboratory you were held in thirteen years ago."

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“Would you like a cup of coffee? Or do you prefer a tea?”

Chuuya eyes the man hovering in front of him like a doting grandmother — the one that calls himself Arthur Rimbaud — and shakes his head. “No, thanks.”

“We have some leftovers from yesterday’s dinner still,” Rimbaud goes on, oblivious. “You two must be hungry after your travels.”

“I’d rather we just get to the point instead of avoiding the elephant in the room.”

The kitchen falls silent. The air thickens. Chuuya sees the other one, Verlaine, touch Rimbaud’s wrist, a silent and intimate gesture that makes Chuuya avert his gaze, except that it puts Dazai into his line of vision, and he doesn’t want to look at him either.

Dazai was right when he predicted that Chuuya would hate him. He does. He’s fucking pissed about this ambush. The least he deserved after everything they have been through is a fucking warning. A ‘hey, so I’m going to fly us to another continent so you can meet the two people who know what the hell that thing inside of you is!’

“Don’t act so surprised,” Chuuya snaps when the awkward silence becomes unbearable, jerking his chin at them. “What the hell do you think I’m here for? To have coffee with you and chat about the weather? Just talk already.” After blowing out an aggravated breath, he mutters, “We don’t have endless time to spare.”

The two men share a glance before Verlaine takes a seat at the table, the last to do so and fulfill their round of four. He folds his hands together and takes a deep breath before looking at Chuuya. “Let’s start with you. What do you know?”

Chuuya swallows the sick flutter of impatience inside his throat, practically dragging the words out of his mouth. “Not much. Just vague stuff.” His shoulders lift wryly. “One day all I know is… darkness, absolutely nothing, the next I’m sitting under a pile of rubble somewhere outside. A whole-ass child without any memories or identity. It took me years to collect some kinds of pieces. Rumors about a vengeful god of calamity. About an enemy soldier who called on it under torture. The creation of Suribachi city. That…” He swallows thickly. “… pull inside me. The constant feeling of having no control over myself. I used to think it was my ability but I mastered that pretty quickly. It’s always been that other thing, wasn’t it?” He gazes darkly at them but doesn’t wait to hear their confirmation. “I

never knew the extent of the damage that thing would be able to create. I mean I had a feeling but I didn't *know.* Until…"

Until he succumbed to it and killed all his friends.

Jaw locked, he raises his chin. "Until last month. Until I saw."

"We heard about what happened," Rimbaud says. "We're sorry it turned out that way."

"I don't need your apologies," Chuuya hisses, fingers curling uselessly around the table. "Just tell me what it was. Tell me how such a thing may exist inside me. Tell me how to *stop* it."

"You can't stop it," Verlaine says. When he sees the way Chuuya's angry hope crumbles — just for one moment — he offers him a regretful smile. Like Chuuya needs that. "I'm saying this upfront to spare you from any unnecessary hope. I think you deserve that. What's inside you can't be stopped, Chuuya. Only contained."

"But you can live with it. It's not an untamable beast that will devour you from the inside," Rimbaud adds.

The flicker of frustration that flashes in Verlaine's eyes mirrors Chuuya's feelings. His mouth twists into a sardonic scoff. "That's fucking easy to say when you're not the one having to live with it."

That's when Verlaine leans forward and catches his eyes. "You're right. My partner couldn't possibly know what it's like to live like that — and I am thankful for that every day. No one should have to do that. But… I know exactly what it's like. I know it because I'm the same as you. I *understand*. All of it."

Chuuya blinks, startled. He glances at Dazai before he can stop himself, searching his face for the truth.

The somber smile that Dazai grants him confirms as much: he knew. He knew that Chuuya wasn't the only one burdened with this curse.

It stings. Like a giant, inescapable papercut. It does. After all this time, Dazai still insists on harboring all these secrets. He didn't bother to tell Chuuya even after *what happened.* But then –

Can he really blame Dazai for not telling him after Chuuya blocked every single attempt he made to raise the topic? Dazai tried. He tried talking about it. But Chuuya –

He didn't listen.

He didn't fucking listen.

And it's this knowledge — that if Chuuya had just stopped for a second before that day he went to *save* the sheep… if he had just *listened*…

Then perhaps his friends might still be alive today.

Chuuya's lips curl. In anger, frustration, grief — he doesn't know. But there's nothing to say there, is there? And there is certainly nothing to do about it anymore either.

He forces himself to look back at Verlaine, finally understanding that expression on his face. That nostalgia. It's not just because he freed Chuuya, according to Dazai. That's only part of the story. It's because Verlaine sees himself in Chuuya.

And for the first time in forever, Chuuya sees something of himself somewhere other than the mirror too.

"That… lab," Chuuya says the word carefully because even though he suspected that it must have been some sort of research facility, he never knew the entire truth. A guess. That's all it ever was. "You come from that too?"

Verlaine's eyes flicker up and to the side, drifting in the direction of his own past before he refocuses his attention. "The people who made me are the same as the ones responsible for what happened to you. Different times and different methods, but the result was the same. That pull you felt and that beast that took over a month ago and raised that destruction? That darkness?" The smile that creeps up on his face is horribly empty. "I have one of my own."

"Oh." It's more concrete information than he's ever managed to collect on his own, but his mind gets stuck on one piece only. *The people who made me. Made me.* And it chimes inside his head like a church bell whose only function is to remind Chuuya of his inhuman existence.

Made, made, made.

He was *made.*

"So we're not exactly the same." Verlaine's voice is dulled by an invisible wall between them, muffling the sounds of the outside world.

The human one. “Not 100%. But our paths are similar enough to be worth sharing, I believe…” And then he says something else, and else, and else and all Chuuya hears are the bells.

Made, made, made, made –

He flinches when a hand touches his shoulder and shatters the wall into thousands of pieces with unforgiving clarity. Dazai's expression upon Chuuya's glance is merciful though. The contrast is striking.

“… how powerless it feels, so if there is anything I can do to help you, ask.”

Dazed, Chuuya nods. “Just tell me everything,” he says quietly. “From the beginning.”

A nod.

“Much like you, my existence had an abrupt beginning. I don’t remember much of those first years because I spent the entirety of them under the control of the group that created me. It was Arthur —” his eyes slide towards Rimbaud without really looking at him, a soft smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “— that freed me from their brainwash.”

“It was not just me. I was part of a tactics team of the Counter-Terrorists Unit here in France. Our mission was to put an end to a terrorist group that went by the name of Pan that had been threatening the government at that time. Our intelligence unit discovered that the ringleader of Pan was a powerful ability user who controlled Paul by feeding him metal dust.” Rimbaud shrugs. “I destroyed that device, so the group wouldn’t be able to command Paul anymore, but he was the one who put an end to Pan and the… brainwashing. He freed himself.”

“I only finished what you started — something I wouldn’t have been able to do without you.”

“Still, the –”

“Yeah, okay,” Chuuya cuts in. “What happened then?”

Verlaine clears his throat and glances at Rimbaud for some reason. The reason becomes clear when he takes over the history lesson. “The organization I worked for decided that Paul was a valuable actif and that I should take over his training and education.”

“I was called Black Nr. 12 back then. That’s the name my creator gave me.”

“But it hasn’t been your name for a while now,” Rimbaud retorts, touching his hand. “I did what was asked of me and trained Paul to be the same type of spy that I was.” The shadow of a life left behind sputters over his face for a moment. Not bitter, not even dark, but a man remembering the prime times of his youth. It dies out as quickly as it came into being. “And I was good. I was *the best.* So Paul became the best as well. And for a while, we were at the top of our game. The most formidable duo in the history of our organization.”

Verlaine coughs into his fist. “You’re the only one who ever called us that.”

“Well, anyways,” Rimbaud pointedly says, “we made an exceptional team, so when our government got word of an artificial new gifted weaponry that was powerful enough to destroy the world, they naturally sent us to retrieve it.”

Chuuya’s gaze darts from him to Verlaine. Then he forces out a small huff and says, “And let me guess. That mission was in Japan, wasn’t it?”

The answer is a nod.

Different people, different times, and yet all in the name of the same damn cause.

Power.

All that Chuuya and Verlaine were to those people were weapons.

“Okay,” he says after another moment. “Go on.”

Verlaine twists the tablecloth between his fingers with a sigh. “I think it’s important you know that years before we went on that mission, Arthur created a special hat for me. Made of specific metals that prevent anyone other than me from having control over the weapon inside me.”

Rimbaud hums like he has forgotten that particular detail.

“You can turn it on and off at will?” Chuuya asks.

“Not off. That’s…” his mouth twists. “…more complicated. But it gave

me — only me — the control to activate it. Others who knew about the kind of weapon I carried inside me were no longer able to use me. It's why our organization sent us overseas to retrieve you. We were two sides of the same coin. Only that the world was at war, and our government decided that you were in the wrong hands."

"Bet they did," Chuuya mutters under his breath before lifting his gaze to them. "It was you then, right? That giant hand that pulled me out of the darkness?"

It's such a faint memory, a flimsy film that flickers on and off, but it's the first one — the very first one — Chuuya ever remembers having at all. The first thing he ever saw, and it came from *them*.

"That must have been me," Rimbaud provides. "They kept you in a glass cylinder for the sake of safekeeping. Yes, I remember it just like it was yesterday." His expression fixes on a place far away from here for a long moment as he murmurs, "Prototype A258…"

"What our intelligence unit didn't learn before the mission," Verlaine says, "was that A258 was only one part of the project that they dubbed Arahabaki."

Chuuya's eyes narrow. "What do you mean, one part? There's a third someone out there like us?"

"No, not like us. You see, what the military facility did that held you captive was follow the instruction manual of the man who created me. Pan. He came up with a way to fabricate artificial abilities and singularities by creating living vessels that would carry those gifts as that's the only way abilities and singularities are able to exist. That's what they were copying when they created your beast, Chuuya. The difference is that they went one step further."

"Yeah, I'm not really following."

"When Paul was still under Pan's control, it was possible due to the metal powders that Pan fed him. They contained a special powder made from his ability. That's how they controlled the beast. After Pan was dead, that wasn't possible anymore."

Chuuya nods. He got this much. "The hat."

"The hat, right," Rimbaud says. "Our organization knew what kind of weapon Paul was harboring inside though, and they weren't willing to ignore its potential. So they… and me — we got creative. We came up

with a different solution to control the beast." Even though he looks at Chuuya, he doesn't really meet his eyes but stares through him like he is too ashamed of what he is about to say. "I could go into depth and try to explain the physics and chemistry of it, but at its core, it was a drug." His hands press against each other. "We created a special drug for Paul, so he'd be able to control it."

"A drug," Chuuya echoes, sliding his gaze towards Verlaine. "And how did that pan out, hm?"

It's unfair to direct his contempt towards the victim — because that's what Verlaine was. Is. He was created as a weapon, and then used as one, no matter how much that partner of his wants to spin the truth. Their government did the same fucking thing that Pan had done. But Chuuya's mouth is filled with too much acid to discern between the lines. All he sees is Verlaine acting like Rimbaud is some kind of savior when it couldn't be farther from the goddamn truth.

And Verlaine's bitter thing of a smile confirms as much. "As well as you imagine. It took a toll on my mind and my body. As a spy, I was stronger than ever before, but as everything else? I might as well have been still under Pan's control, only that the thing that was controlling me now was the drug. It's all I wanted. All I could think of each day. All that kept me going even when I stopped eating and sleeping. I wasn't even human and still, I became a shell of what I once used to be."

At least Rimbaud has the decency to look ashamed. He somehow manages to meet Chuuya's condemning gaze though.

"I have committed many heinous crimes in the name of my country, but that one — That one I regret the most. But…" His shoulders pull back eventually. "… it was an order, and back then my organization's commands were my law. The only law that I followed. Even if it meant ruining the only person that I cared about." A humorless laugh sneaks between his words. "Especially because of that. I'm sure I don't have to explain what it's like to live for your organization to the likes of you, right? You're port mafia. You know what I mean when I say that you blindly follow orders without questioning them, and when I say that the people giving the orders prefer you to be alone, without any family, friends or lovers that could make you stop and see what kind of monster you've turned into."

"Sounds to me like you're no different than Pan," Chuuya tells him, barely capable of stifling a hiss. "I'm sure they were just following

someone's orders, too."

"It wasn't Arthur's choice to make," Verlaine says. "If he had refused to, someone else would have given me the drugs."

"No, don't defend me. Chuuya is right. I wasn't any different from Pan, or from the military that robbed you of your life. I mean, it was our job to create the same kind of life for you, after all."

"Why didn't you?"

Verlaine rubs his forehead before speaking. "That's where all these pieces of our lives come together. The Japanese military only knew how to recreate that powerful weapon in the form of an artificial singularity. They didn't know about the drugs or how to control that weapon, and without control, it was useless. So they created something else to do that. Someone else."

Chuuya's heart starts knocking wildly against his chest.

He has this feeling.

Of seeing the trees but not the entire forest. Not yet.

Except that slowly, bit by bit, the fog is starting to lift.

"Someone with the ability to turn off the weapon again once it's activated. Someone who was specifically designed to control you."

And it's right there.

The whole picture.

Chuuya knows — deep inside his heart he just *knows,* but he still follows the direction of Verlaine's eyes. The way they flit past him and to his right.

To Dazai.

Chuuya slowly turns his head and looks at the man who made him join the port mafia when their organizations were enemies. Who hasn't treated him like an enemy even once. Who denied him an answer as to why time and time again…

Until now.

Hey, Chuuya. I've been waiting for you.

The only time I ever made a wish as a kid, it was less of a wish and more of a promise. To myself. You see, I stumbled upon something, but I couldn't take it with me and had to leave it behind. So I made a wish. A hopeful promise, I guess. To find it again.

She's so young. They always are.

"You," he whispers.

Dazai's gaze, who has been cooly watching this entire scene unfold like a spectacle, softens when he looks back at Chuuya. "Me."

And Chuuya's mouth twists. "You…!"

Dazai does a shit job of blocking the punch that Chuuya intends to swing at him with full force, which is why he doesn't — even if he wants to so badly it makes him sick. "You fucking… piece of shit…" he hisses, instead of giving Dazai what he wants. "How many times did I ask you for the truth? How many fucking times did you not give it to me?"

"To be fair," the bastard has the gall to say, "would you have believed me if I told you this make-belief story about –"

"I have some kind of nuclear bomb inside me — yes, I would have believed you!"

"That is a blatant lie. You don't even believe me when I do something nice for you!"

"That's *because* you keep lying to me instead of telling me the fucking truth!"

"You were dead-set on hating me — and killing me, I might add — from the very beginning. I assure you, it would not have been as easy as you make it sound!"

"I don't care! You should have told me anyway! It was *my* past! *My* life that you hid from me! I deserved to fucking know that you were apparently born into existence just to fucking control me!"

"It was my life too!" Dazai snaps back, and the gravity of his voice startles Chuuya into silence. It only keeps his anger at bay though; it doesn't erase it — even if that is apparently Dazai's purpose.

Growling under his breath, he jumps up from the table and stalks away, though he only makes it to the counter, gripping the hardwood until the bones in his fingers threaten to pop out.

The silence behind him is charged with tension.

“I still deserved the truth,” he whispers eventually with his head between his shoulders. “It was both our lives, and *you* knew but I didn’t – and…” As the haze of his anger clears, more questions appear in front of him. More, more, more. All Dazai ever brings are question marks, never answers. He spins back around to glare at him. “How did you know? I don’t understand. Why do you know and I don’t?”

Dazai sighs. “Well, I was going to tell you but you were too busy yelling at me.” He raises his brows. “Do you want to hear my side of this little tale now, or do you want to yell at me for another five minutes?”

Shaking his head, Chuuya mouths, “I’ll fucking kill you.”

Dazai’s twinkling eyes are full of artificial mirth. “I doubt that,” he mouths back.

And Chuuya hates that he is right.

As much as he feels like strangling him right now, he would still beg Dazai to stay alive for him at the end of the day.

That’s the sad reality.

But it’s not a lie.

“Son, you should seriously consider how you handle such sensitive topics." Verlaine suddenly says from the other end of the table. It’s an unwelcome reminder that they are in fact not alone but that they have an audience.

“Yeah, no, Chuuya would kill me if I ever started treating him with kiddie gloves,” Dazai casually retorts. “Wouldn’t you, dear?”

Chuuya refuses to give him an answer — or any sort of attention, really.

“No one’s talking about kiddie gloves, but perhaps a touch of compassion. Just a suggestion.”

Dazai ignores him in favor of looking at Chuuya. “Well? Do you want

to hear or not?"

"I need a fucking drink if I have to listen to your bitch ass speaking," Chuuya mutters with his hands folded over his chest and a death glower reserved just for Dazai.

Rimbaud rises from the table with a sigh. "I can arrange that."

"Yeah, lucky for you we are in the business of wine now instead of toppling foreign governments and retrieving powerful weapons," Verlaine jokes dryly.

Chuuya rolls his eyes and huffs out a breath. "I hate all of you."

Somehow they all make the collective but unspoken decision to wait until Rimbaud returns with the wine. When he does, carrying a bottle that looks home-brewed, Dazai twists in his chair until he can face Chuuya before he begins speaking, lifting his index finger into the air. "Not to spoiler the entire thing, but my tale of woe is not the same as yours."

"Just say your piece," Chuuya snaps, and grabs the bottle of wine to take several angry swigs.

"Gee, all right, all right," Dazai relents, too fucking casual about it for his airy tone to be genuine. It's part of his past too — he said it himself. The nonchalance that is on display right now is just a defense mechanism. "I wasn't created in the laboratory, nor am I a string of codes. Trust me, I would prefer it if I had been. At least that would explain some things." The bitter smile that creeps up on his face — *that* is true. That is not a fucking lie for once. "What I was, though, was the son of a man who would have done anything to stay in power, and in his case, that anything was entering a contract with the government and giving me over to their military laboratory."

His eyes sweep over Chuuya. "They needed something to control you, and my father offered them my ability. Because of the nullification factor, I was the best possible fraction of a solution. And…" He shrugs. "… we were the same age, so that was a plus too, I guess. I mean, who better to control than two children, right?"

Chuuya's jaw clenches.

"Anyway, my ability doesn't work on singularities, only on abilities, so they had to get creative as well. After a few wonderful months of probing me with sticks and rods, they managed to genetically modify

my ability into disabling singularities — Arahabaki in particular. And thus, their project had been almost completed. All they had to do was wake you up and test it out, but the two French men were quicker."

Verlaine hums. "We didn't know about Osamu's role in the project. We only know about you — prototype A258. So when we began our undercover mission and discovered that they had someone to control you, it threw a wrench into our plans."

"I made the decision to change our mission to retrieving both of you," Rimbaud adds. "I saw the effect that the drugs had on Paul. I didn't want to imagine what it would do to a kid."

"I didn't like any of it, deep inside my heart, but I was too amped up on the drugs to realize how wrong it was what we were doing until it was too late and we were in the middle of our mission and in enemy territory."

"Because of the change of plans with Osamu in tow, we had even less time to make our escape and get to the submarine that would take us home. The war had just ended. Relationships were a delicate minefield. We were running, trying to flee without leaving too much damage or traces behind, and then… I just stopped and I could for the life of me not make myself take one step further. I didn't want to take either of you back to France with us. I didn't want you to have the kind of life that I had. But…" he glances at Rimbaud.

"But he wasn't alone in the mission, and out of the two of us, I had more to say. I had the drugs. I made the decisions. And I couldn't let him sabotage… not only our mission but our lives. If we stopped, we'd either get hunted by our own government or by one we had just stolen from. Either way, we would be soon dead.

"I had given up so much for my country, and now Paul was asking me to let all of that go to waste. I couldn't. The spy in me had been trained to fight whatever is necessary to avoid that specific outcome, so I did. I fought Paul over it."

They share a charged glance.

Chuuya squints. "Yet here I stand. Not a brainwashed soldier for the French government. I take it Verlaine won?"

They share another look. It makes Chuuya a little sick.

"Well," Verlaine says, clearing his throat. "Things got a little heated.

Arthur is an exceptional fighter, but I… I had a monster inside me."

"He had one inside himself, but I had one stuck inside the body of a child," Arthur says with a nod toward him. "And when Paul threatened me with his beast, I threatened him right back and…"

"… and that is how Suribachi city came into being," Chuuya finishes lowly. "Isn't it?"

They nod.

"Unbelievable," he mutters. "How many people had to die just because you two got into a pissing contest?"

Verlaine's eyes harden. "I did it for you."

Chuuya silently glares back at him.

"I didn't want you to spend your life being someone else's weapon. I wanted to take you with me and raise you as a normal kid without ever telling you what kind of horrors your government inflicted on you. I thought you deserved that, and for that, I was willing to do whatever was necessary. If people can kill to get power, why is it so wrong to kill to liberate someone? Even if it was just two souls?"

"I told you exactly why that was wrong," Rimbaud answers. "Mainly, that you were too fucking high to realize what you were sacrificing anymore."

Verlaine huffs to himself. "Yeah, that didn't bode well with me of course. I was pissed. I mean, who were you to tell me I was just an insane addict when you were the one who fed me drugs all the time?"

"Yeah, that probably wasn't the best thing to say at that moment," Rimbaud scratches his temple, "but given the magnitude of the threat, I decided it was worth it." His expression turns grave again. "A lot of people lost their lives today, and it is as much on me, as it is on Paul. If I had seen that what we were doing was wrong just… sometime earlier…"

Chuuya lets out a heavy breath.

He wants to say that it doesn't fucking matter. They still killed all those people. But… who is he to judge them for their sins when his own ones are just as bad?

In the end, he really is the same.

The same kind of monster that brings destruction to innocent people.

“I did see it eventually,” Rimbaud continues after a long moment of silence. “Too late, but I saw. I saw those beasts and the sheer agony that their vessels were under and I knew that I could not let it go on for a second longer. I stopped fighting. I told Paul I didn’t want to do this anymore. I screamed myself hoarse trying to get through to him in that state… and somehow, he heard. Not only that, but he stopped. He stopped fighting, he believed me, and then just collapsed. His body too drained from the strain of the drugs.”

Chuuya tilts his head in confusion. “And Arahabaki?”

All this time he believed he was solely responsible for that crater. That giant graveyard.

He’s not sure how to feel now that he knows that’s not the entire truth.

Rimbaud nods at Dazai. “I woke him up and made him nullify your beast.”

Chuuya looks at Dazai.

Dazai looks back with an unreadable expression. “I was just seven years old and woke up in the middle of an apocalyptic scene after months of being held in a laboratory. Someone told me to do something, so I did it. And then.. everything just stopped.” His eyes lower to the ground. “Everyone was dead.”

One glaring question remains though.

Well, two, but one he wants to ask Dazai in private.

Chuuya turns to Rimbaud and Verlaine. “So what happened to raising me in the countryside?”

“I finally saw Paul’s way, but raising you…? That was a pipedream. If we had taken you in, someone would have eventually found out. I thought it was best to let our government believe that we both died during the extraction… as did you, and then part ways. We left you with the other boy, and then we went dark. We have been ever since.” He makes a face. “Paul, of course, didn’t like that.”

“Yeah, I didn’t,” Verlaine doesn’t hesitate to agree. “Leaving you two out there to fend for yourself was as bad as turning you over to one of our governments.”

“And I kept telling him that it wasn’t.” Rimbaud waves over them with his hand as if to make a point. “See? They’re safe and sound — and still together. That’s what I figured when I left you two as well. I thought that if you, Chuuya, didn’t know what has been done to you… that maybe you would have a chance at a normal life. A better life than the one Paul was given. A life without drugs, and deadly missions that require you to sell your soul, and sacrifices…”

“Except that the boy that you left Chuuya with was the son of the port mafia boss,” Dazai chimes in wryly. “Everything you wanted to spare him of, he would have gone through all the same. Just ten times worse.”

Rimbaud thinks about these words, eyeing both of them thoroughly. “But he never had to, didn’t he?”

Chuuya’s breath comes to a grinding halt.

“No. He didn’t.”

And there is the answer to his second question.

Why did you leave me back then?

He drills his stare into the side of Dazai’s head but this time, Dazai refuses to look at him. Instead, he keeps his gaze trained on the muted rapping of his fingers against the table.

Arms crossed, Chuuya prays for a little bit more patience. Just a little more. “So, that’s it, huh?”

Verlaine nods. “That’s the gist of it, yes. If you have any more questions…”

Hundreds.

Like what exactly does all of this make Chuuya? Was he just like Dazai — a kid that the government toyed with to make more of their weapons — and he simply doesn’t remember the life before this one? Or is he like Verlaine, an artificial being that was only created to be a nuclear bomb’s vessel?

And does it really matter?

And how did Verlaine manage to get off the drugs?

And what do they mean when they say *activate the beast?*

And did that damn instruction manual on creating artificial beings fall into other hands — did it create another dozen cursed lives just like them?

And –

So many questions, but right now, Chuuya's head is thrumming with only one… and that one is not meant for Verlaine nor Rimbaud.

"I do, I just —" He falters, glancing around helplessly, unable to explain that awful sensation that has wrapped around his throat like a cord.

They're in France, for god's sake.

What are they supposed to do here?

And how long does Dazai plan to stay?

Rimbaud seems to understand nonetheless. Nodding, he rises to his feet with a small smile. "How about I show you where you can rest for now? And later — or tomorrow — whenever you're ready, we can talk more. Preferably over food." He tsks loudly. "Such heavy topics don't go well with an empty stomach."

Chuuya's too late to stifle the snort. "Yeah, okay."

Dazai follows them without a word — though Chuuya sees him steal the bottle of wine on his way out. Rimbaud leads them out of the house and across the stonework walkways between the bungalows. Their two security guards join in when they notice them leaving, and for a silly, drunken moment Chuuya feels like he is part of a group of ducklings waddling after their mother hen.

The heat is clearly getting to his head.

They get their own entire Bungalow — and so do Hideo and Todaki, though they decide to rest in shifts while the other one remains on standby. Rimbaud talks a lot. Something about the water and how it takes a few minutes to warm up, how there is no food in the fridge beside the basics, and that there is only one bed but a couch that they

can use. Chuuya hears him speak but only listens to get it over with. When it is — the door falling shut after Rimbaud leaves — the silence that stretches between them is prickly and thin.

And Dazai is the one to make the first cut. “Well. Do you hate me?”

Vacantly gazing out of the window and over the acres of vineyards, Chuuya forces out a paper-dry huff. “Yeah, Dazai. I hate you.” When he turns around, he sees the exact expression that he expected to see: a rare flash of fragileness but also the sardonic smirk of someone who *wants* to be hated — but it’s only then that he realizes that Dazai’s scorn is directed inward, at himself, not at the outside.

“I hate you for giving me the chance to stay free instead of dragging me to your father so he could use me — us both — as a weapon. I hate you so much. I mean, how could you? You’re the worst person in the world.” Each word packs a punch. By the time Chuuya raises his brows, Dazai looks like he has been stripped naked, his breath hitching nervously as he works hard to keep up that pretense of a grin.

“That’s what you wanted to hear, right?” Chuuya pushes further as he takes a step toward him. “That I’ll just take back what I asked of you because you didn’t tell me any of this?”

“You seemed awfully close to doing that just now,” Dazai retorts, his voice deeper than his usual pitch of indifferent nonchalance.

Chuuya nods and comes even closer, all without taking his eyes off him. “I was angry. I still am. I deserved to know what happened to me — to *both of us.* And still,” he stops when they are only a chest apart, “not for one fucking minute, did it ever make me hesitate.”

“Too bad,” Dazai murmurs, staring back down at him. “Maybe you should recalibrate your standard. Can’t be healthy forgiving everyone so easily.”

“Cut the crap,” Chuuya finally snaps, sick of this game they’re playing. “I know that you brought me here as some kind of sick twisted attempt at pushing me away in typical Dazai Osamu fashion! Well, guess what! It didn’t work!”

Just the fact that Dazai turns his back to him and starts heading the other way — anywhere but towards Chuuya — is proof of that.

“I brought you here because I decided that you should finally face your demons, Chuuya. You know, so you can avoid any further

accidents in the future.”

“Yeah, Dazai. Hit me where it hurts the most,” he sneers, going after him up the stairs. “Go ahead. Push a few more buttons. Maybe that will make me hate you, right?”

“Chuuya thinks too much. All I did was tell you the truth. You've been asking for it for so long; why are you suddenly upset about it?”

“Because you’re giving up!”

“You are being ridiculous — and overdramatic.”

“Then why can’t you even look at me?”

“Because I would prefer not to break my neck,” Dazai quips and turns to offer Chuuya an overtly bright and overtly falsely breezy smile in the bedroom. “Here. I am looking right at you. Does that make you happy?”

It makes Chuuya want to punch him. His fists tremble under the urge. But in the end, that would be taking the bait that Dazai is dangling in front of him yet again. Everything — from the moment they stepped on that plane, to ambushing Chuuya with his past, to this conversation — is just a ploy to slither out of the promise that Dazai gave him.

Chuuya won’t have it.

“You’re majorly fucked in the head. Do you know that?”

The glee dissolves in Dazai’s eyes but the smile stays plastered on. “It’s not like I didn’t warn you.”

Yeah, apparently that’s what he is still trying to do. Warn Chuuya to let go now because he is oh so terrible and messed up. He is. And while his actions, his secrecy, his manipulation tactics infuriate Chuuya to no end, they are not enough to push him away anymore.

He made a commitment.

He went down on one knee and told Dazai he would protect him.

He isn’t going to take that back now just because Dazai is acting out to achieve the opposite.

“Exactly,” Chuuya mutters, pushing past him to get deeper inside the room. “So I’m already well aware. Spare yourself the trouble and

accept that I don't really give a shit."

"You do. You give a shit about how people treat you. You're not a doormat even if you let the sheep treat you like one for most of your life."

Chuuya shoots him a blasé stare over his shoulder. "I'm curious. What exactly did you do all those years ago after Rimbaud and Verlaine left?"

"Don't know," Dazai says with a half-shrug, all of a sudden playing dumb. "Probably left you somewhere to rot. I didn't really care about what was happening to either of us then if you haven't noticed by now."

"Really?" Chuuya asks provocatively. "Because I always found it odd that I *happened* to end up under that bridge where the sheep used to hang out. With clothes, no less. How did I manage to do that, I wonder?"

Dazai of course hears the underlying accusation in it. And his response is unrepentant apathy. "You must have been a natural talent at surviving from the start."

"And the fact that the port mafia never outright tried to kill any of the sheep, even when we stole your shipments — that was all me too, I assume?"

"Maybe if you listened to me once in a while, you wouldn't have to ask questions we already discussed months ago."

"Yeah, obviously. Silly me. You didn't want to start a war with me, right? Makes so much sense, especially when you could have just nullified my powers all along and ended it right then and there."

"Like your ability is the only thing that has kept you alive all this time." Dazai's eyes flash coldly at him. "It is not your style to act weak, Chuuya."

"Playing dumb doesn't look too good on you either, and yet here you are, suddenly keen on pretending you haven't been looking out for me all this time!"

There.

He said it.

“Life isn’t a fairy tale with a happy ending where the villain has been the hero all along. Just because I didn’t care enough to kill you, doesn’t mean I was ever looking out for you.”

Chuuya throws up his hands. “So why am I HERE then?!”

“So you can finally get a grip on Arahabaki and blow the Bishop’s Staff to pieces.”

“Not here, but with you! In the port mafia! Why did you make me join the mafia after all this time without ever actually using me for your own benefit?” And before Dazai can conjure another baseless lie out of a hat: “Why did you conveniently drag me to your side right when the Bishop’s Staff started waging a war on the streets?! Is that how you treat every person out there that you don’t fucking care about?!”

He's not sure if the blow lands or not — Dazai has constructed a fortress around him that grows icier as he advances towards Chuuya. When Dazai grabs his face and forces him to look at him, he feels as though he is either about to freeze to death or disintegrate.

Keeping eye contact, Dazai leans down until their breaths intertwine and whispers, “I wanted *out.”*

Chuuya’s gaze furiously searches for the meaning of his words.

“I wanted an out of the port mafia, an out of being the boss, and an out of this life. Everything that I did from making you marry me to making you shadow me to let you do whatever you want without any consequences has been to set you up as the next boss. That’s it. That’s all this ever was.”

His skin grows cold. He shakes his head. “You’re lying.”

Dazai lets go of him and takes a step back. His smile is the picture definition of cruelty. “I think you are the one that’s lying. To yourself.”

“That doesn’t make any sense,” he murmurs, blinking furiously except that –

For once, he can’t see the truth underneath-

For once, it feels like that’s what it is.

That Dazai is using the actual truth as his ploy.

“Why the hell would you want to make me — a stranger — the next boss?”

“But we are not strangers now, are we?”

“Just because we were both designed to work together as a weapon, doesn’t mean we are more than that!”

“What happened to that grand theory of yours — how all I’ve been doing this whole time was look out for you, hm?”

“Doesn’t change anything!” Chuuya snaps. “It doesn’t make sense. I have never shown the slightest interest in the port mafia before. It’s insane to go through all this to make me the next boss when you have a dozen more suitable members and executives that could do the job. You’re *lying.”*

“And you just don’t want to see the truth,” Dazai counters easily. “I wanted an out. I chose you to be my replacement. Why I chose you doesn’t matter. You’re focusing on the wrong details.”

“And the right details are what?” Chuuya hisses, stabbing a finger into his chest. “That you manipulated me into staying? That all of this — you and me — has been part of a giant scheme to make me care this entire time?”

Dazai’s eyes narrow ever so slightly. “Your suspicions have been right all along. And you *care.* You do.”

Except that his voice doesn’t go down at the end.

Except that he isn’t sure whether Chuuya really does.

And the truth is that Chuuya doesn’t know anymore either.

He sighs and it drains him of all his highs, leaving him tired and deflated. A balloon running out of air. Floating a few centimeters above the ground. “If I suspected all along, what is there to care about?” he asks quietly, honestly. “So you used me.” He shrugs weakly. “So what, Dazai?”

If he had any energy left to spare, he’d find the look of bewilderment on Dazai’s face satisfying. “All I’ve ever done was part of a lie,” he repeats like Chuuya hasn’t heard him the first time. “That’s… that is not something you just shrug off and live with.”

“What do you want me to do?” Turning around, Chuuya coughs out a laugh and drags himself to the bed. “Leave? Your plan worked perfectly, Dazai. I care, and I have nowhere else to go. I’m not going to abandon the ship just because you decided to be honest for once. Besides…” He casts a glance toward Dazai. “… even if it was all part of some fucked up plan of yours, it doesn’t take away the things that happened.” His gaze slides back to the floor. “And it doesn’t undo the promise that I made.”

“Have I really pushed you so far that you don't even care?”

Just like Chuuya’s question earlier, this question’s function is nothing but sheer honesty.

“Yeah,” he admits.

“You don’t… care? Not at all?”

“I think you’re a fucked up piece of shit that my life would have been easier without.”

“And?” Dazai presses, desperate almost.

“And nothing. I think my life would have also been easier without the things that they did to me in that lab. Or without the Bishop’s Stoff existence. But those things happened.” He shrugs dazedly. “So what.”

The mattress dips next to him. He feels Dazai look at him but can’t seem to drag his gaze out of the nothingness. “You do realize you’re comparing me to the two worst things that ever happened to you?”

“I guess that makes you the third worst thing.”

“That’s not how these things are supposed to be like.”

“These things,” Chuuya mutters. “Whatever could you possibly mean?”

“You. Me. You and me together. You can’t pretend I didn’t tell you all that. That’s *unhealthy*.”

“You and me…” Finally, he manages to look at Dazai and musters a half-bitter smile. “Is that what you think would push me over the edge? That your performance would hurt my feelings? I never asked for any of that, Dazai. We fuck. We keep each other relatively sane. We keep each other company. And we keep each other alive. That’s it.

That's all I ever wanted and you have given me all of that. I don't care whether you did it out of fondness or out of self-interest. I don't fucking care."

Dazai stares back at him. He does so for a long time before he eventually places a hand on Chuuya's knee and murmurs, "I'm sorry."

Somehow Chuuya doubts that Dazai is apologizing for all the terrible things he told him today.

"I'm sorry for ruining you. That was never part of the plan."

Yeah. That's the thing about plans. They never quite go as expected.

Chapter End Notes

Soooooooo.... how are we all feeling? Let me know in the comments... aha... ha ha... <3

Next Chapter we have:
- a training session
- a compromise
- a ride

Chapter 34: Meursault (Part II)

Chapter Notes

Warnings are in the Notes at the end!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dazai has spent the last two hours studying Chuuya's face trying to find the cracks that allowed yesterday's apathy to pour in, but all he found were freckles and beauty marks.

That's no surprise. These festering wounds rarely ever show up on the surface; instead, they hide in the deepest part of one's soul, feeding off the darkness like parasites and growing, growing, growing until they have infested everything.

Somehow, though, Dazai made the stupid assumption that Chuuya was immune to this kind of sickness. In no way is he invincible or unbreakable — no matter how often he acts like it; that much has become obvious over the last month, but…

But he was supposed to be stronger than Dazai, at least.

That endless resilience of his was supposed to protect him from the untamable beast that nested somewhere inside Dazai during his childhood and has refused to leave ever since.

Maybe Dazai infected him. And that's why Chuuya listened to him speak last evening and then shrugged it off like it was nothing. Like *Chuuya* was nothing.

Indeed, this was never part of the plan.

A lot of things weren't.

And the more their path deviates, the more space opens up for doubts to creep in, and that –

That leads to moments like these.

"How long are you planning to stare at me for…" Chuuya mumbles, eyes remaining closed even though he woke up several minutes ago. "Freakin' creep."

“Chuuya,” Dazai says, poking his cheek.

Chuuya groans into his pillow, not happy about being robbed of his sleep on their little vacation. *“What?”*

“Are you awake? Fully awake and conscious enough to think, I mean?”

“Now I am,” Chuuya mutters and drags his eyes open to express how displeased that makes him. “What is it?”

Dazai stops bothering his poor bottom lip with his teeth and decides to be brave and look into Chuuya’s watery blue eyes when he speaks. “What if we… just go?”

The moment stretches long and thin and… flat.

“The hell are you talking about?” Chuuya eventually mutters. Sliding an arm under the pillow, he closes his eyes again and lets out a sigh. “We already *just went.* We’re in France in case you forgot.”

“No, you don’t understand. What if we never return to Yokohama?”

That is enough to get Chuuya to frown himself to full lucidity, scrambling to sit up in bed, his hair sticking up in all kinds of directions.

Having his attention, Dazai goes on. “We could vanish. Go somewhere where no one will find us and start new lives. Start all over again and do it right this time. If you insist, we could snatch Yuan on our way out, but no more than that. No port mafia, no wars, no nothing. Just freedom.”

Chuuya’s eyelids flutter back at him. “Just leave?”

Dazai nods.

“And what do you want us to do? Play fugitives all our lives?”

“I have enough assets hidden all over the planet to ensure we would be safe and lost, and I mean…” he gestures between the two of them. “Look at us. I think we’d have no issues sending whoever would dare to come after us straight back to the hell that is Yokohama. Rimbaud and Verlaine did. We could too.”

“We could open a winery just like them,” Chuuya murmurs, huffing out a half-smile.

“If that’s what you want. We could do anything!”

Despite the softened look in Chuuya’s eyes, Dazai can see that it’s all it is. Just a look. Not conviction — not the same one that is making Dazai say all these things, so he goes one step further and reaches out to cup Chuuya’s cheek. “Don’t pretend you’ve never stopped to dream about what life could have been like if you had been born into a normal family. You had dreams once, Chuuya. All of us had.”

“What’s yours?”

Dazai pauses. He rolls around to stare at the ceiling like it has all the answers. “I could imagine spending my days painting. I think I’d like that.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. It’s relaxing. I like that I don’t have to think when I do it. I could spend the whole day painting things outside. We’d obviously have some kind of farm too.” He sneaks a glance at Chuuya. “Unless you would prefer to live in the city?”

Chuuya stares back at him for a moment. Shrugs. “I can see myself doing both. City’s nice… but out here, it’s good too. So much light and space.”

“Jiji would have the time of her life venturing outside.”

“I don’t think letting a domesticated cat out into the wild is a good idea.”

“Fine. Then we keep her inside. Our house will be big enough for her and twenty more pets. Would you want other pets? You like dogs, don’t you?”

“Sure.”

“We could get ourselves a dog. Or five. I personally prefer cats, but I could train myself to warm up to those giant, slobbering beasts.” He pokes Chuuya’s forehead. “What would you do?”

“Hm?”

“How would you spend your days? Aside from entertaining the dogs — and me, of course.”

“Dunno,” Chuuya murmurs, eyes somewhere far away from here.

Dazai's are too, yet somehow he doubts they are looking at the same future.

"Have you ever considered becoming an architect?"

"Not really."

"Yeah, that's too time-consuming anyway. What about writing?"

Chuuya's glassy gaze flickers to him. "Words aren't really my strong suit."

"They don't have to be. They just have to mean something."

The longer Chuuya looks at him, the more Dazai's idea unravels, right here, between them. It's strange to study his partner's face and end up with more problems than solutions. Even when Chuuya was lying through his teeth, acting like he wasn't trying to find some dirt on the mafia to leave it behind in flames, Dazai had no issues seeing past that flimsy façade. But now —

It's not that Chuuya has turned into an exceptional liar. It's that there is nothing to find anymore.

"I'm not going to become a writer, Dazai," he finally says, swinging his legs out of bed to face the windows. "Or an architect. Or the owner of ten dogs and some imaginary farm. I'm not going to run away, and neither will you. That's not how life works."

"It could if we just did it."

"I don't want to spend the rest of my life playing pretend with you."

Outside, comes the muffled laughter of Verlaine, followed by Rimbaud's voice. Dazai can't make out the words, but he hears the undeniable mixture of fond exasperation that makes him sick with jealousy.

"It doesn't have to be pretend," Dazai tries. "We… *I* could make it up to you. I could spend the rest of my life trying to make it up to you." After all, out of every bullet of truth that Dazai fired at him yesterday, the deadliest was the fact that he offered it all. The truth had never been part of the plan. Chuuya was supposed to stay and take over. Making him care this much was a side-effect that Dazai had anticipated and left open. Caring himself was something that caught Dazai off-guard.

And if he can't have his out, then the least he wants is to have a chance to give that side effect a chance to unfold.

"All you have to do is say *yes*."

Chuuya looks at him over his shoulder, soul buried somewhere behind a silver smokescreen, and says, "No."

Dazai takes the leap. Dazai crashes and burns and the ground is dreadfully hard.

"You feel guilty and want to make it up. Deal with it like an adult, but don't try to rope me into a make-believe world that's never going to happen."

Chuuya passes the window paying no attention to it. The door of the bathroom on the other side of the narrow hallway on the second floor creaks as it falls shut. But Dazai can't help but get up and stare out of it.

This life.

An oversized straw hat sits on Rimbaud's head as he stalks across a patch, armed with gloves and a hose pipe. Verlaine's taking turns scribbling something down on his notepad and watching his partner — his husband, actually, since they got married five years ago — work with a smile that is unmistakably human. To think that he used to be a brain-washed soldier once…

This life.

It seems so far out of grasp on the 33rd floor of the black tower in Yokohama. Like Dazai could run for years and still never get close to it.

But here?

It's close.

So close.

The only thing that stands between them is the right answer.

But Chuuya has already burned the bridge, and Dazai is too tired to make the journey alone. From here on, it's either downhill or backward, but this life? This place of light?

It sinks and leaves nothing behind but the memory of what it once was.

***

“So this is what you do out here all day?” Chuuya asks after adding another croissant to his plate. “Tend to your garden, eat pastries, and –” He scowls like the mere idea of mundane life is offensive to him. “— pretend to be normal?”

After their conversation this morning, it probably is.

Verlaine takes the underlying insult in stride, chuckling in amusement as he places his cup of coffee back on the table. “I wish that’s all we did, but no. Our winery is quite intimate and local — and for a reason, naturally — but it still requires a lot of work to keep it going.”

“And a lot of paperwork that Paul hates,” Rimbaud adds from his seat next to him.

“It took me years to master reading and writing, but I refuse to spend that skill on bureaucracy.”

Dazai takes a loud sip of his tea. It is as pitch-back as his mood. In the corner of his vision, Chuuya shifts in his seat.

“Yeah, so I do all the paperwork,” Rimbaud goes on. “Not my favorite part of this job, but I don’t hate it as much.”

Verlaine grunts in agreement before looking at Chuuya. “In any case, there are lots of things to do here other than eating and relaxing. Customers, transportation, processing, our gift store and the bistro restaurant, employees…” He flicks his fingers through the air. “It all requires handling. We took a few days off when Dazai informed us you’d come to visit, though. Figured the least we give is time.”

Chuuya takes a big bite out of his omelet and chews for a few seconds. “Yeah,” he replies in a flat tone then. “Thanks for that.”

Verlaine is good at masking his surprise — he must be given his existence — but the way his eyes slide to Dazai, inevitably searching for an explanation for Chuuya’s odd behavior this morning doesn’t need a verbal translation.

Dazai continues drinking his tea without helping him out.

Once Verlaine realizes he is on his own here, he drops his gaze and clears his throat, engaging in a murmured conversation with his husband instead.

“So I have questions,” Chuuya announces once he is finished with his food.

Verlaine’s eyes widen over the rim of his cup before he nods. “Sure, go ahead.”

“Am I human or not? What’s the deal here?”

The silence that follows is quite awkward. If Chuuya’s mood — apparently even worse than Dazai’s — hadn’t taken a toll on him as well, he would find his ability to make everyone here sweat incredibly amusing.

“I can’t tell you that,” Verlaine says with a sigh. “Our intelligence unit back then didn’t specify whether your artificial singularity was the only artificial thing about you. Given Osamu’s reports, it’s possible that you were modified the same way as him.”

Chuuya side-eyes him for a second, then resumes scowling at Verlaine. “I mean, you guys retrieved me out of a… what was it? A cylinder? It didn’t say anywhere whether the thing inside was human or not?”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Osamu, do you have any recollection of your time in the laboratory?” Rimbaud asks, dragging him into this pitiful mess.

“Plenty,” Dazai answers dryly, “but nothing that answers this question. They weren’t really fond of talking to their test subjects, you know.”

“Hm.”

“So much about answers,” Chuuya mutters, leaning back in his seat and crossing his arms. “Then what about that beast? That’s what you call it?”

“We coined it that way to talk about it easier, yeah.”

“How do you turn it on?”

Verlaine takes a moment longer to answer that. “It requires a special passphrase, which I would prefer not to utter aloud in order to avoid

any incidents. Think of a door inside your head. When you say the phrase, the gates open and the beast comes out and takes over. I used drugs to force it back inside — they gave me a sliver of control during the entire process. In your case, Dazai's your drug."

Dazai snorts.

Chuuya ignores him. "The passphrase is the only way to open it? Because I… I don't remember saying any passphrase and it still happened."

"I think I know what you mean," Verlaine murmurs, stroking his chin. "It didn't happen out of nowhere, right? Something triggered it, like, say, an extreme emotion?"

Chuuya forces a breath out of his nostrils, nodding wordlessly.

"I'm not sure how it's possible — how our emotions are connected to the passphrase and since I'm not the man who came up with this idea, I can't tell you anything certain either. I just know that your emotional state heavily influences your decision to open the gate. It's about control, I think. Uttering the passphrase is giving up control. Letting your emotions take over can mean losing control in some cases too."

"Hell of a weapon they created," Chuuya mutters under his breath. "Letting us blow up every time we get angry."

"But it doesn't happen every time, does it? Only in extreme cases," Verlaine says when he must see the guilt start to leak from Chuuya's voice. "That's the good thing. You can train yourself to have more control over it."

Chuuya narrows his eyes in question.

"We had to train a lot to become as good as we were," Rimbaud supplies. "Days of turning it on and off, on and off, on and off, and testing the limits and abilities of it." His mouth twists into a grimace. "It required an awful lot of drugs for Paul back then. Luckily, you won't have to."

Chuuya eases up on the questions, swirling his coffee aimlessly with a spoon as their hosts clean the table and do the dishes. He only turns to Dazai when the two men vanish somewhere.

"You wanted me to get a grip on that thing, right?" Chuuya's chin lifts

in silent defiance. “Then let’s do that. Let’s train.”

Dazai stares back at him, gauging how much of it is bravado and how much of it comes from his wish to run the Bishop’s Staff to the ground. Eventually, he dips his chin. “Let’s train.”

***

They take the car and follow the GPS to a place in the countryside that is not only far enough to avoid any damage to the winery but also deserted. Hideo and Tadoki follow them in a car lent by Verlaine and Rimbaud with the instruction to stay a safe distance away that they should only ignore if Dazai fails to check in on the radio for longer than thirteen minutes.

Verlaine gave Chuuya the hat before they left, so he could try it out for himself, and it’s now perched on top of his low ponytail.

“Does it feel different?” Dazai wants to know from behind the steering wheel. Last time, Chuuya took over because he made the ridiculous claim that Dazai’s style of driving was ‘too dangerous and would therefore attract unwanted attention.’ This time, no one is here to witness his driving.

Chuuya frowns and pokes the hat like he’s forgotten he’s wearing it before shrugging. “Not really. Ugly maybe.”

“Heh, let’s see –” Dazai’s right hand reaches out and steals it promptly to place it on his own head, presenting himself to Chuuya with a bright grin. “How do I look?”

“Like a piece of shit.”

“Is that so,” Dazai murmurs and gives him the hat back. “How about now?”

“Like a piece of shit without an ugly hat.”

“Chuuya,” Dazai says. "I'm not sure if playing with Arahabaki when you can barely stand my sight is a good idea. A lot of this is based on trust, you know?”

“Hah? I told you I don’t care. I don’t hate you more than I normally do.”

“Really? Because I can sense some… conflicting emotions in the air.”

The more precise description would be that Chuuya's lack of actual emotions — not that paper-dry excuse of irritation that has replaced the real ones — is what worries Dazai. An angry Chuuya he can work with — that is what he prepared himself for when he said all those things yesterday. But this Chuuya?

This Chuuya is a delicate minefield.

"And you're not in a shit mood because of what I said this morning?" Chuuya counters instead of replying.

Dazai's index finger taps against the steering wheel. "I'm not the one who is about to give himself over to a singularity."

"Yeah, only the one that I have to trust to bring me back. And I do. Why can't you trust me to do the same?"

"I don't…" But maybe Chuuya is right. Maybe he sees something that Dazai has pretended not to. "I don't trust people," he admits after a pause. "On principle. Trusting anyone, even myself, was the first thing that my father trained me out of as a kid."

"What's the damn point of living then?" And when Chuuya notices the epic irony of asking the man he forced to promise to live this question, he presses his lips into a thin line. "Oh."

Dazai finds himself smiling for some reason. A tiny but incredibly stubborn shape that refuses to back down. "Don't give my father all the credit. I contributed a fair share to it as well."

"Is it that awful?" Chuuya murmurs. "To live? To stay?"

"Is it that awful to imagine leaving this life behind and starting something new? Something good?"

Chuuya's eyes snap to him. "That's not the same thing. I'm talking about *living*. You're talking about…"

"Living," he finishes for him.

"… running away. You want to run away and *live a lie*."

"Rimbaud and Verlaine aren't living a lie. They just ripped out the pages and started a new chapter. There's a difference between that and pretending."

"They didn't leave behind an entire war," Chuuya grits out. "And all

the people that rely on them."

"Didn't they? I'm sure the people in their organization relied on them too. That the same people were worried about what the Japanese government would do with Arahabaki. Yet they all lived. Rimbaud and Verlaine chose themselves."

"Maybe they shouldn't have. Thousands of people would still be alive then."

"And thousands of others would not be." Dazai slides him a look. "Just imagine how much destruction the government would have caused if they had used us as intended."

Chuuya shakes his head. "I don't have to imagine."

Right.

As the argument only leads them into repetitive circles, Dazai steps out of it and searches for the thread that led them here. Chuuya had asked him a question. Maybe it's time to answer it.

"I'm tired." Around them, there is nothing but space. Kilometers and kilometers of green fields as far as the eye can see. So many of them that Dazai could close his eyes, take his hands off the steering wheel, let the car drive by itself, and still –

Nothing would happen.

It's like drifting on the open sea, with no anchors or a shore to bind you. No meaning.

"Don't you think I'm tired too?" Chuuya mutters, voice like gravel.

"I know you are, but do you see me telling you how to deal with that?"

"Killing yourself is not fucking dealing with anything, and I'm not going to let you make me feel guilty for refusing to look away and accepting that. I won't. I don't care how much you hate me for it."

"Great," Dazai murmurs to himself. "A life spent in misery. But who cares as long as we're alive, right? That's all that matters. Survival. The most important thing in the world."

"Yeah, you staying alive is important to me." Chuuya's unnerved tone makes Dazai blink in surprise. It's not like this is shocking news.

Obviously, it's important what with all the lengths Chuuya is willing to go to to keep him alive. But hearing it in its essential form — not disguised as a threat or the result of a vow that was made when he hit rock bottom — is a strange feeling.

A mixture of sweet satisfaction and bitter knowledge.

Maybe Verlaine was right. Maybe Dazai is his drug.

The rest of the car ride is silent. After another hour, Dazai decides that they're out far enough, so he informs their security team to stay back for now, and stops the car.

Chuuya jumps out of the car first, wading through the long grass, swaying from time to time with the breeze, and stops a few meters out, planting his hands on his hips as he looks up to the sky. When he looks over his shoulder, it's with raised brows.

"Are you coming or not?"

Humming, Dazai grabs the notepad that he brought along, closing the door behind him before walking around the car. "I'd suggest starting with basics. Just turning Arahabaki on and off. Establishing a feel for the entire thing." And because this is Chuuya he is talking to, he rephrases it into a question rather than a command. "Is that what you were thinking of too?"

Chuuya's bouncing leg practically drips with impatience but he forces out a stiff shrug. "Fine with me." And when Dazai stays casually perched against the car, he asks, "Do we just… start?"

"Whenever you're ready."

Even though he does mean what he said — that Chuuya should test the waters of his volition — he does feel a frown cut itself into his face when a few minutes pass by and nothing happens. Dazai clears his throat and tilts his head. "Chuuya dear, are you waiting for something?"

"No, I just –" Chuuya's hands clench into fists as he looks at him from a distance. "What if something happens?"

"Like…?"

"Like you underestimate the power of that thing and get killed before you can even try to stop it. What if the first time was pure luck? What

if it burns the whole country to the ground if no one is there to stop it?"

Dazai's lips press together. He leaves his notepad on the hood of the car before trudging across the meadow and towards Chuuya. "That's why we are trying it out here. From a safe distance." A self-deprecating chuckle tumbles out of him. "I mean, I know I'm not the most physically apt person in this world, but I can handle myself, Chuuya. My father made sure of that."

"This isn't just some person that you can outwit," Chuuya snaps, his eyes so fierce that it warms the cold, rotten heart inside Dazai's chest. "It's a beast –"

"It's an artificial singularity."

"That has the power *to destroy the whole world.*"

Dazai wraps his hands around Chuuya's arm. "It's a weapon, yes, but I assure you, Chuuya, that I know my way around weapons. Nothing will happen."

"It better," Chuuya hisses. "Don't you dare use me to kill yourself. I'll find a way to turn it off just to kill you myself."

Dazai's grip around him softens but lingers. "Don't worry. I'm not that selfish."

Chuuya's expression remains tight and conflicted but he eventually forces out a nod, taking a deep breath before stepping away from Dazai.

The air begins to crackle with electricity before Dazai even reaches the car. His heart falls into a rhythm too, slamming faster and faster as he watches Chuuya murmur the passphrase and wipe the humanity off his face.

His frown is the first to go, replaced by a blank mask with white, lifeless eyes and a slack mouth. Next are the glowing symbols that carve themselves into his skin — and Dazai makes a mental note to try to get a picture so he can study the signs in patience later. The earth under Arahabaki's feet trembles. Up in the air, birds scatter across the sky and away from here, loud and alarmed and hasty as powerful gusts of wind roll off the man in the epicenter.

Even the air smells different. Thick with heat and the scent of an

anomaly — something happening that shouldn't be able to happen.

Arahabaki's stare is trained at nothing. His head only jerks when the birds in the sky get louder — that's when he reaches back and a black orb starts to grow in his palm.

Dazai reaches him before he can catapult the orb off into the sky. The moment his skin touches Chuuya's wrist, the rigid muscles in his body go slack and Chuuya's pupils return. Panting, he blinks at the ground for several long moments. Then he turns his head to Dazai.

"Are you okay?"

It lasted two minutes tops, yet the toll it takes on him is written into every line of the pained grimace on his face.

Eyes screwing shut, Chuuya nods. "Yeah. How long…?"

"A few minutes. I stopped you before you were able to blow the birds out of the sky." He lets go of Chuuya's wrist and places it on his back instead. "Did you perceive anything at all?"

"No. I mean –" He coughs into his hand before heaving himself upright. "I can feel it. I'm awake. I just… it's like I'm trapped inside a thunderstorm. I know what's happening, but I can't control it."

"How much does it hurt?" Dazai wants to know.

"It's fine." Chuuya shakes off his hand and takes several firm steps forward, only shooting him an adamant look over his shoulder. "Let's go again."

"You sure?" Dazai asks even as he retreats. "It would be wiser to take breaks in between. It's a huge strain on your body."

"I can handle it."

For someone who has so much to say about suicide, Chuuya is remarkably bad at ignoring his own limits. But he is already muttering the words to open the gate, and there is nothing to do but wait and observe.

For the next two hours, they repeat this process over and over, extending the length of Arahabaki's presence each time to see what exactly he's capable of. An entire chunk of a tree gets swallowed by one of his black holes in the process. A few wild rabbits possibly, too.

Since Chuuya's not able to control Arahabaki during the entire process at all, there is nothing they can do to refine his attacks, but the test runs still provide them with a lot of valuable information that will surely turn useful in the future.

For one, Arahabaki is an excellent tool for a bomb. If used and timed correctly, then the act of leaping off a building and activating Arahabaki at the same time equals dropping a bomb. A lot of natural destruction and collateral damage. Perfect to use on enemy ground.

Then there is Arahabaki's resilience and vitality. When Dazai offhandedly mentions that any kind of weapon is most likely useless against Arahabaki, Chuuya insists on testing that theory by letting Dazai shoot him in that state. It certainly attracts Arahabaki's attention — and it's the one time that Dazai gets a little too close to death that day — but their theory proves right. Which means that if they end up outnumbered, whether in men or in weaponry, in a battle Arahabaki will be the ace up their sleeves that will ensure victory.

More important to Dazai than to Chuuya are the effects that Arahabaki has on his body and person. The longer Arahabaki takes over and the more damage he either sustains or inflicts, the heavier the toll on Chuuya. He makes do with five-minute breaks the first few times. Afterwards, he instantly passes out and Dazai carries him to the blanket they spread out on the grass and waits for him to wake up again.

They have been at it for the better part of the day when Chuuya's eyes flutter open after his fifth nap. His hands push against the ground, trying to get himself into a sitting position but he ultimately gives up with a small groan in the back of his throat, head dropping back on the blanket.

"Rest, Chuuya," Dazai murmurs, snapping the notebook in his lap shut. "We've done enough for today."

"Just gimme five… ten minutes. I can handle one or two more go's."

"I doubt that."

"I *can*," Chuuya growls, covering his eyes with one pale arm.

"You can, but you don't need to. I have fifteen pages filled with observations. That's enough."

"And what if it's not? What if… what if we overlooked something and

–” He breaks out into a coughing fit, his lungs seizing so hard that he has to roll to one side. Dazai doesn’t miss the specks of blood on his hands when they wipe at his mouth.

“Are you really going to push this when you’re spitting blood?” Dazai snaps before he can help himself.

Chuuya’s glazed-over eyes lazily find him as he tilts his head. “What’s the problem, Osamu? Thought you liked… dancing with death?”

“I never said I liked to *watch.”*

“Then don’t. I’m not…” He coughs again, the fit shorter this time but no less powerful. “… not going to die, ‘s just a little blood.”

“Well, I’m not going to bring you back again if you decide to be stubborn; then we'll both die like a pair of lovers committing suicide. How about that?”

The reply is an unhappy grunt. Chuuya doesn’t attempt to sit up or move anymore though, resting on one side with his arm under his cheek as his eyes flutter open and shut every now and then.

Dazai revises his notes in the meantime, adding thoughts, observations, and questions to consider later. He assumes Chuuya has dozed off again, so he blinks when Chuuya speaks. “What was it like? In the laboratory, I mean.”

The pen in his hand pauses, hovering a centimeter above the page. Dazai’s mouth opens to speak but he finds himself at a sudden loss for any suitable words. Like he has somehow reached his limit today, and now all that’s left are things that are best kept in the empty grave in his chest.

He takes a few pathetic gulps to jumble something together.

“Well, it wasn’t a spa weekend, that’s for sure.”

Chuuya’s silence is as loud as the unimpressed stare when Dazai casts a glance at him from the side. Sighing, he puts pen and paper away. His gaze stays glued to the tiny particles of wool of their pastel blue blanket. “Is there anything specific you want to know? Because overall…” He shrugs. Overall, it was an experience that he has buried somewhere at the bottom of his well of misery a long time ago.

“What did they do to you?”

“Procedures, surgeries, experiments, that kind of thing. They had to try out a lot of stuff to achieve satisfying results.”

“Why…” Chuuya scrambles to sit up and frowns when Dazai reaches over to help him but doesn’t push him away. “… would your father do that? It was the government, right?” He shakes his head. “He doesn’t sound like the kind of guy to work with the state.”

“It was the government's military branch. Before he became the boss of the port mafia, my father was a soldier.”

“Oh. I didn’t know.”

“Of course,” Dazai huffs. “How could you? It’s not like there is a google entry about the man.”

“Or like you talk about it often,” Chuuya mutters, then winces right after. “Not that I can, y’know, blame you.”

With a hum, Dazai lowers his gaze back to his hands and uses them to pluck grass from the earth. “The old man was an avid war fan. He said that it’s the one place, the one time, that people get to be who they truly are. Animals, who either eat or get eaten. Just flesh and bones without a soul.”

“Meat. That’s all you are to them. And that’s all they have to be to you. Do you understand that?”

Osamu is seven years old; he squints in confusion when the boss looks at him expectantly, waiting for an understanding that isn’t there. “But you said I’ll take over someday.” How is he supposed to lead their organization when he is there, *giving them his blood, instead of here with him and their people?*

“Son, do I look like I’ll be dead anytime soon?”

An amused smile from the boss eases the weight on Osamu's shoulders. This isn’t a punishment. “No, of course not.” He resists the urge to start another sentence with ‘but.’ The boss doesn’t like those very much.

“It’s not forever. We’ll continue your training once you’re back.” He pats his lap then. “Come here, Osamu-kun.”

Osamu obediently walks around the table and settles on his legs.

“Think of it as an extended training session,” the boss tells him. “You will

get to put your skills to practice. We will see how much progress you've really made."

"And then I'll come back? After I pass?"

Osamu likes tests. They are so straightforward. All he has to do is execute his tasks and that's it. But the thought of spending so much time away from home, still makes him queasy, especially because he heard Shuji whisper that the place he is going to is like a hospital. Osamu hates hospitals.

"After you fulfill your purpose there, yes."

Osamu hopes that Bunji will have killed Shuji by then. His twin brother is the most bothersome but also his fiercest competitor out of the entire litter. Shuji should be going to the hospital place, not Osamu, but only one of them was born with a gift.

"Meat," he whispers with a determined nod. "They're just meat."

"Anyways." Blinking, he drags his eyes back to the living — to Chuuya who looks at him and maybe even sees what Dazai sees. "He had people in the government and when he heard that they were working on the Arahabaki project, he offered them a deal. Me, as a test subject with the most convenient ability for their research, in exchange for a skilled business permit that would let the port mafia officially operate with abilities." He forces out a huff. "And, of course, a significant say in the project. We would have been his to use. The government's and his."

Chuuya is quiet for a long moment. Dazai can't blame him. What is there to say?

"Is that why you killed him later on?" is what Chuuya asks in the end.

"Among other things," he says. "Mainly because he became completely irrational. Started killing innocent civilians out of unreasonable paranoia. His personal physician back then decided that he had to put an end to it before the man could drag the entire city down to hell with him. When I realized what he was up to I joined him, so he wouldn't dispose of me like the other heirs."

"Mori. That was his name, right?"

A hum. "Mori Ougai."

"Did he kill your siblings?"

“A few.”

Dazai’s lips are already parted to answer the next question — *and did you take care of the rest?* — but it never comes. Chuuya’s eyes are still studying him, but he spares him from uttering that out loud. Perhaps because Dazai already did that once if he remembers correctly. He already told Chuuya. When he was quite inebriated, but maybe Chuuya’s memories are better than he lets on.

“What, done so soon with the interrogation?” he drawls.

Chuuya huffs. “I’m just trying to understand.”

“Understand what?”

“I don’t know. Everything.” He shrugs. “You.”

“If you’re looking for a map that will tell you where it all went wrong to make me into who I am today, you’ll only find disappointment. I was already thinking of ways to kill my own family to secure my spot as the next boss in line before I reached puberty. It just is what it is.”

“But you cared enough to become the boss,” Chuuya argues, stabbing a finger into the ground. “You cared enough to get *here.* What changed?”

“Nothing.”

“Well, something must have because you could have run away after Verlaine and Rimbaud left. You could have stayed in Russia when you met Dostoevsky. But you came back. You fought to stay alive. You fought for something. For *what?”* His voice cracks a little. “What made you hang on for so long that is no longer there?”

Dazai gazes blankly at him.

“Come on,” Chuuya mutters. “You’ve told me this much. What is it, Dazai? Why is this life not enough anymore?”

But the one thing –

The one piece of truth that has the power to even cut through Chuuya’s stubborn loyalty refuses to leave Dazai’s mouth. Maybe he is selfish to deny them both that absolution after all the pain he has already cost them both. It is. But he doesn’t want to say it, now or ever. He wants to bask in the warmth of Chuuya’s boundless

acceptance for a few more weeks.

So he spins the truth until it's presentable enough to deliver on a platter.

"Life has never been enough. The only thing that changed is that I *tried.* I tried to make it worth living, to see if there was anything worth staying for, and to find reasons to hold onto. I failed. There is nothing. It's useless."

"Nothing," Chuuya echoes. "Nothing at all?"

Dazai's mouth twists into a bittersweet smile. "Nothing."

"Not even your imaginary farm and dogs and cats and painting?"

Dazai's head lifts to him. "Does it matter? You said no."

"I just — I want to know if that would have been enough."

"Would I have suggested it if it hadn't been?"

Chuuya stares at him like he's just told him that the earth is flat. Like he not only doesn't believe him but *can't.* "A fucking life on the farm. That's it? That's all it takes?"

Not a fan of the tone, Dazai swings his head in the other direction and juts out his chin. "I don't know why we are still talking about this."

"Would it still be enough if we left *someday*? Not now — there are too many things to do that we can't leave unfinished — but someday in the future when we don't owe anything to our people anymore."

Dazai seizes him with a reproachful stare, tsking loudly. "That's cruel, Chuuya. Tempting me with a *maybe."*

"It's not a maybe, but a *someday.*" Dazai stiffens and automatically leans back when Chuuya crawls forward on his hands and knees, crowding him until their faces are only a breath shy apart. "You can't do this forever and I can't possibly leave everything behind *now.* But somewhere along in the future…" Chuuya blows out a long breath and offers him a crooked, tentative half-smile — the most real thing Dazai has seen in days. Weeks even. "Why not? I can give that to you. If you give me this."

Dazai squints. "How far along in the future are we talking about?"

“I don’t have an exact timeline of how long it’s going to take to settle all our business, Dazai.”

“Well, forgive me for asking, but I’m not going to wait around for ten years –”

“God, fine. I don’t know. One year? Two? Five?”

“Five?!” Dazai’s hands fly to Chuuya’s shoulders to give him a little shake. “What do you need five years for? Are you planning to take over the entire continent in that time?”

Chuuya glares at him like an unamused kitten from under his fingers. “Obviously *not.* I’m just not ready to settle down at twenty-two and spend the rest of my life being a farmer.”

Dazai can see his point. He can also see that while he had twenty whole years to live it up in the heart of the port mafia, Chuuya’s only had a few months so far — and they were enough to give him a taste of the most delicious, toe-curling piece of cake that comes with the price of your soul.

He can see it now. It’s as clear as day even as the sun begins to set above them. That glint of hunger of a chained creature that has experienced boundless freedom for the first time in Chuuya’s eyes. That’s the catch with the mafia. That underneath all the sacrifices, the blind loyalty, and the blood that it takes from its members lie an addicting premise of true power, and more often than not that greed overshadows everything else.

The port mafia has cost Chuuya so much.

And yet here he is, asking Dazai for a few more years.

Dazai has ridden the same wave once. He thought that the high that comes from being on top would last forever, that it would be enough to tame the beast of emptiness.

He was wrong.

It was just another distraction. Another peak ended with a drop into the well of misery.

“How about three years,” Dazai suggests because he can’t deny Chuuya something that he is responsible for creating. “And when we’re there, we renegotiate?”

Chuuya squints at him, searching for the fine print. Such a clever boy.

Leaning closer, Dazai brushes his mouth over his jaw. “Come on, Chuuya. You know I’m a man of my word.”

“Says the *liar,”* Chuuya breathes out, finally dropping his weight on him, curling one hand in Dazai’s shirt.

“Not when it comes to this.” Dazai draws back to look at him. “When have I ever broken one of our deals?”

Chuuya’s shuddering exhale says as much as *never.* The little minx is just too stubborn to admit it, hands tightening.

“Chuuyaaaa –”

He muffles Dazai’s sing-song voice by knocking their mouths together. *Actually* knocking them together. Dazai breathes out a pained noise that Chuuya devours like a starving god feasting on his fresh sacrifice, biting his lower lip and then sucking it into his mouth to soothe it with his tongue.

“Three years,” he whispers between bruising kisses and rocks his entire body against Dazai with one slow, agonizing grind. “And then… ah, we’ll see.”

Dazai clutches at Chuuya’s hips and nods, dragging them down and against his crotch. “Deal.”

“Deal.”

Dazai would like to pretend that this dance they are dancing becomes more graceful as the desperation bleeds into something steady and promising, but instead, with each racing heartbeat, their mouths become wilder, chasing every spark of pleasure like it’s prey. And while Dazai has always been rather good at adapting to his surroundings like a chameleon, it becomes clear that Chuuya’s riding another wavelength than him when pushes his nose against Dazai’s pulse point and gasps so hard that he almost tears his lungs in half.

“Hey, hey,” Dazai murmurs, making him look at him by driving his fingers through his hair. “Easy there.”

But what stares back at him isn’t Chuuya. Not really. It’s a feverish, glass-eyed version of him.

Stifling an amused smile, he brushes some of the sweat-soaked bangs out of his face. “Feeling a bit needy, huh?”

“Feeling like I’m fucking *dying,”* Chuuya mutters, barely able to focus his eyes on him before he buries his face back in Dazai’s shoulder, hips grinding against him, fingers digging into his back. “Need you to fuck me. *Now.”*

That however makes Dazai cringe silently. “About that… I don’t think we have any lube here.”

Chuuya’s muscles go rigid. “What?”

“We don’t –”

“I heard you the first time, I just – we always have lube?!”

“I always carry it in my coat, but my coat’s somewhere in the bungalow.”

“Dazai,” Chuuya croaks out and draws back to stare at him with a pair of threatening eyes. “I need to be fucked or I’m going to *die.”*

Dazai chuckles nervously. “You’re not going to die –”

“No, you don’t understand. I will. I’m already dying and –” Chuuya helplessly tugs at his shirt, hips squirming in his lap. He muffles a keening whine against his collarbone. “I need it. I really need it.”

“Hm. I didn’t anticipate this to be one of Arahabaki’s after-effects,” Dazai muses under his breath. The last time Chuuya spent an entire day passed out in bed. And afterwards –

Well, there was obviously too much grief to really notice anything else, he guesses.

But now that he thinks about it there was also some highly desperate sex, but he assumed that came from the grief, not Arahabaki.

“I’ll have to note that d —”

“Dazai!” Chuuya cuts in and yanks him forward with a fist curled in the collar of his shirt. His breath washes over Dazai as he hisses, “Find us some lube or do it without, I don’t care, just do *something!”*

“Okay, okay, let’s not get ahead of ourselves here.” After giving Chuuya a few reassuring pats, Dazai stretches his body to the side to

reach for his phone. Chuuya's lips attack his shoulder as soon as he is back in reach. "I'll find us some lube but… but if I somehow fail at that –"

"You can't fail."

"*If* — and we'll hope not — then I'll just blow you for however long you want because I am not fucking you without any lube. Especially not out here."

Chuuya basically sobs into his shoulder. "I don't want your stupid mouth, I want your cock! I want you to fuck me!"

"Chuuya?"

"What?!"

"Breathe. Just breathe, okay? With me?" Dazai takes a deep breath and then a long exhale, motioning Chuuya to repeat after him until Chuuya's nails relax around him and he breathes. A little. But it's something.

"Good. Yeah, like that. You're doing great," Dazai murmurs, petting his cheek, skin flushed with cold sweat before he unlocks his phone, finds the number of their security detail, and presses the phone to his ear.

"Everything okay, boss?"

"Wonderful. I need you to do something for me. Search the entire car — every little corner-for lube, got it?"

There is a beat of awkward silence before Hideo says, "On it, sir."

Dazai doesn't remember packing any lube into the second first aid kit that they left in their car, but maybe they get lucky and they will find a magical bottle somewhere. And if they aren't, then Chuuya will explode and kill Dazai. Or the ride home will be a very uncomfortable 90 minutes — 50 if he floors it — for both of them.

Still squirming, Chuuya helplessly rubs his nose against Dazai's neck, inhaling deeply and then groaning out a miserable, "Do they have some?"

"They're still looking."

"I'll kill them," Chuuya whispers feverishly.

Dazai can't help the chuckle that escapes him, though he tries to apologize for it by rubbing Chuuya's back. "That's a bit unfair, no?"

"No. They've been in your security detail for how long?" Chuuya's fingers go white from clutching his arms so tightly. "They should know by now to carry ten bottles of lube everywhere we go. Incompetent... worthless… pieces of –"

"Boss?" Hideo's voice says on the other end of the line. "We found some. I don't think it, uh, belongs to you but –"

"It'll do!" Dazai exclaims hastily. "How soon can you be here?"

"Ten minutes…?"

Chuuya steals the phone and snaps, "you'll make it in five" before tossing it over his shoulder like a useless piece of junk. Dazai has no time to complain about it, already being pushed to the ground. Holding his face between his hands, Chuuya kisses him deeply enough to climb inside him.

Knowing that the lube is on the way and that he'll get this romp come hell or high water must have tempered some of his blistering impatience because the way Chuuya rolls their hips together is nothing short of slow and sinful. Then his lips wander lower, to Dazai's jaw, to his neck, and his hands seem to be everywhere all at once on a quest to –

Chuuya pauses when his right hand slides over Dazai's pocket. Blinking, Dazai opens his eyes and lifts his head to see what made Chuuya stop.

The answer is the small baggy of coke that Chuuya has fished out of his pocket. "You brought your drugs but not lube?!"

"Apparently," Dazai murmurs and scratches the back of his head, just as surprised by this discovery as Chuuya, though not as affronted. "Hey, to be fair, it's way easier to carry."

"Fucking bastard…" But Dazai doesn't miss the way Chuuya can't tear his eyes away from the coke, returning to the baggy every time he looks away.

Dazai sits up, forcing Chuuya to shuffle back a bit, and lifts it to dangle it between his fingers. "Want some?"

Chuuya nods even faster than expected.

“Okay, then let me just…” Dazai searches for his notebook, humming when he finds it. He rips out a blank page and rolls it into a tube — not as good as bills, but the best that they have right now. His product is already fine enough, so all he needs to do is form a line on top of the notebook before offering the finished result to Chuuya. “Here you go, dear.”

Apparently, it’s not just sex that has Chuuya feeling so impatiently. All his inhibitions seem to be lowered at the moment. He yanks the tube out of Dazai’s hand and leans down to inhale the line in one go like a champion.

He sniffs a few times after coming up again. His gaze is still glassy and feverish, but that edge of madness has softened around the edges.

Dazai cups his cheek, brushing the pad of his thumb over Chuuya’s lips. “Good?”

Chuuya hums, eyes locked on him, as he parts his mouth and bites down on his finger.

“Now,” Dazai warns softly. “Good dogs don’t bite, Chuuya. Are you a good dog?”

Clearly annoyed by the comparison, Chuuya rolls his eyes, breath rushing over Dazai’s skin, but his teeth soften around him.

“Be a good boy and suck, baby.”

This time, it’s not a huff but a moan that Chuuya makes, eyes falling closed as he sucks Dazai’s thumb into his mouth.

“Maybe you don’t want my mouth, but I want yours,” Dazai murmurs, pushing down on his tongue to elicit another delicious hiss of breath. “I bet that would satisfy you as well, huh? Let me fuck that pretty little mouth of yours however I please. Would you like that, hm?”

Chuuya tugs impatiently at his shirt, raking his nails over Dazai’s bare skin when his palms slip underneath and let out a wet, low groan around his thumb. His eyes flutter hazily, half-lidded, as Dazai slides out his thumb to seize his jaw and get a good look at him.

Chuuya looks mighty lost, caught somewhere in a desert storm of pleasure and need and sensation.

It's incredible watching this man, who summoned a natural calamity that could level cities into his body time and time again, melt like snow under Dazai's touch. A rush like no other. And maybe waiting three years, or five, or ten, is worth it. Maybe the oxidizing weight of life is just a tiny bit more tolerable if this is what it means to be alive.

A beam of bright headlights focuses on them and breaks Dazai out of his Chuuya-induced trance.

Their delivery is here.

"Why don't you wait here while I get the lube, yeah?" he says, flicking Chuuya's cheek. After he receives a silent nod in reply, Dazai rises to his feet, dusts himself off the pollen in the air, and heads towards his security detail who awaits him with a matching pair of blank-faced expressions. So professional.

"Thank you," he says, accepting the tube of lube — it's a French brand — and waves them goodbye with a pointed smile. "You are free to return to your bungalows now. Chuuya and I will no longer require your services tonight."

"Will all due respect, boss, but as long as you're out in the open, you do require our services," Hideo retorts.

Tadaki agrees with a dutiful nod.

"Says who, the prime minister?" Dazai drawls before dropping all pretense of patience. "That was an order. Go." He jerks his chin forward and to his amusement, the two of them flinch back like wounded dogs. "Scurry. *Now*."

A minute later, their car is doing a 180 and driving away.

Chuuya's still where he left him, minus his clothes. Those are already pooled in a neat pile next to him. And while Dazai admires the productivity…

"Aren't you cold?"

Chuuya answers by grabbing his hands and dragging him down to the ground and into another heated, feverish kiss. "This will warm me up," he whispers, reaching for the lube and unscrewing the cap with shaky fingers.

Nonetheless, Dazai still strokes his palm over the muscled expanse of

Chuuya's back — at least, until he realizes that Chuuya has not only taken charge of handling the lube but the entire prepping process: his arm disappears between his legs and then falls back on the blanket, bracing himself on one elbow as he slides two fingers into himself and exhales a shuddering breath.

"That's greedy, Chuuya," he scolds softly even though he's in no hurry to tear his eyes away or stop Chuuya from fingering himself. "And impatient. Not –"

"Not right now," is the hissed reply. "You'd take too fucking long and I –" His voice cracks under the spark of stimulation, head falling back to face the endless sky. "I *need* this."

Dazai doesn't need him to say that twice. However, he refuses to play a passive role in this even if watching is just as fun. Chuuya's too busy to notice that Dazai coats his fingers in lube before shifting to sit closer to his parted thighs.

"So I'm slow, huh?" he says, wrapping his hand around Chuuya's. "Let's see about that."

Chuuya's body stiffens, and he has barely managed to pry his eyes open when they screw shut again in the wake of a full-body gasp as Dazai takes over the pace and the rhythm, thrusting them in and out to demonstrate just how fast he can be. Fast enough for Chuuya to buck his hips when Dazai thumbs at his stretched rim, then start to grind forward desperately to meet the index finger that nestles along next to his own digits before all three slide into him.

It's a tight fit but just like with everything else, the two of them make an exceptional team. Soon, Chuuya's grappling at the blanket, head tossing back and forth. He twitches with every grind that puts pressure against his prostate. And Dazai knows it's not long anymore until –

"Shit," he mutters, slapping his wrist with his free hand.

"Don't stop," Chuuya whines below him. "Why'd you stop?"

"Because –" And it happens again. Something tries to bite Dazai, and by something he means a pesky, tiny mosquito. "I'm being attacked!"

Chuuya's hips rock up against him to resume the rhythm that Dazai isn't giving him, too lost in pleasure to understand or even hear what he's saying. That is until he makes a surprised sound of his own and

promptly hits a spot on his shoulder.

“Yeah,” Dazai says. “That.”

His next whine is not that of pleasure but that of utter misery. “What do these things want from us? I just – I just need to be fucked; why is that so fucking hard to do?”

“You’ll get your sex, but I do suggest moving this thing to the car,” Dazai says and slips out his finger, relieved that Chuuya’s at least still lucid enough to do the same, albeit with a glower that borders on angry tears. Arahabaki has really done a number on him.

“I hate it here,” Chuuya mutters, scrambling to his feet and violently grabbing the lube before he stalks off to the car. Still stark-naked, if Dazai might add. It sure does make for an amusing, certainly not bad, sight.

Because he doesn’t want to risk adding to Chuuya’s wrath, he leaves the blanket and his clothes as they are, something to take care of later, and follows him instead.

In the car, Chuuya’s glaring at the seats like he is trying to decide which piece to pummel next. His expression softens somewhat when Dazai slides into the driver’s seat, if only with relief because the next thing he knows, Chuuya’s already climbing on his lap.

“No more delays,” Chuuya declares as his fingers yank Dazai’s pants down and free his cock. “You will fuck me *now.”*

Dazai has a few witty replies flying around in his head but they fly out of it when Chuuya’s fingers wrap around his cock, tight, so tight, stroking him rough and dirty and expertly.

Chuuya lets out a satisfied breath. “This will do.”

Dazai’s eyes slide over the stretch of his naked body down to where his legs are spread around Dazai’s thighs to line up his cock to his entrance. The first push is always the most maddening, a sliver of what’s to come, and they both sigh in unison when the tip slides past the most narrow part and into tight, slick heat.

Chuuya rocks his hip a little, thankfully lucid enough to give himself enough time to sink down, though a big part is most likely since this is one of his favorite parts. That sensation of being empty to being filled. That rush that washes over the spine. It’s maddening.

“God, yeah,” he breathes out when his ass meets Dazai’s pelvis. “Finally.”

“Good?” Dazai asks, brushing his fingers over Chuuya’s warm cheek.

Chuuya hums and circles his hips in reply, testing the edges of his pleasure until he must find what he’s looking for, letting out a shivery gasp. “Very good,” he finally murmurs, only returning Dazai’s admiring gaze for a single second before his eyes flutter shut on his way up, then squeeze tightly as he drops down again. “*So* good.”

The heat around Dazai’s cock is divine but the sight of Chuuya riding him, taking what he needs like a man with a single mission? It’s insane.

Gripping Chuuya’s hipbone, he groans. There’s a coil in the base of his stomach and it’s tightening at a dangerous speed. Yet somehow the noise only seems to spur Chuuya on, his walls twitching around him as his ass rises and drops down on his cock again and again, their desperation synchronizing.

“You’re a sight,” Dazai murmurs somewhat helplessly. His hands lift to Chuuya’s face, cupping his cheeks, and just looking. Looking, looking, looking because the way Chuuya gazes back, eyes half-lidded and dazed, cheeks flushed, and hair a fiery halo around him –

It’s magical.

Chuuya's upper body dips forward almost magnetically. Their mouths brush, breaths tangling, but don’t linger long enough to kiss, only to create charged electricity.

Rocking his hips forward, so that Dazai’s cock drags against his prostate inside, Chuuya chokes out a gasp. His hand lifts to wipe his nose. He looks high — on this, on the pleasure, on Dazai — and it’s infectious, causing Dazai’s breath to grow hot in his lungs and melt his brain to useless goo, all that’s left is the thought of *Chuuya, Chuuya, Chuuya* only.

“Come on,” he whispers, brushing a few sweat-stroked strands out of his face. “Take whatever you need, sweetheart.”

Chuuya’s face tightens in concentration, his bounces dwindling into small, dirty grinds that graze his spot just right. Dazai nods and urges him on like that, squeezing the full flesh of his ass until Chuuya’s muscles tighten and his breath hitches before the coil breaks and

breathy, winy gasps start spilling from his mouth as he clutches Dazai's neck like a lifeline that will get him through his shivery orgasm.

By the time Chuuya slumps forward in his grip, Dazai feels light-headed from the pressure of Chuuya's spasming walls around his cock. The air fills with heat as their mouths brush again and again until that tension snaps and Dazai drags him forward with his hands around his neck, crushing their lips together to get that damn kiss.

Chuuya practically melts against his chest, breath dazed and shivery but mouth still eager to return each molten kiss. They break apart with a soft, slick noise, foreheads still touching, and then Chuuya slides his hands around the back of Dazai's neck and picks up his pace again, still somewhat sluggish in the wake of his orgasm.

It gives Dazai the perfect position to pull Chuuya tighter and wrap his lips around one nipple. He sucks, tongue lapping at the hardened bud, and responds to Chuuya's breathless hum by giving him a graze of his teeth, a hint of pain amidst all this pleasure.

"Fuck," Chuuya breathes out somewhere above him, hugging Dazai closer to his chest as he arches into the touch. "Shit, yeah…"

He lets Dazai play with him until his nipples are red and sensitive before he pushes him back against the seat with a flat palm on his chest. "Now let me take care of you."

"I'm already being well taken care of," Dazai says though he doesn't resist, letting himself rest back and enjoy the show that Chuuya puts on just for him.

He rides Dazai nice and slow at first, biting his hand that comes up to touch his lips like he is some sort of blushing maiden who is doing this for the first time. Like he doesn't know exactly what tricks to pull to have Dazai melt under his touch. Once Chuuya has him all pliant and light-headed, he picks up his pace, slamming down *hard* and clenching around his cock until Dazai's eyes roll back in his head, but when he comes so close to the peak that he tastes the first sparks of his orgasm on his tongue, Chuuya slows down, reducing his rhythm into a sensual roll of his hips that has Dazai's fingers dig into his hips.

"What –" He has to suck air into his lungs to formulate words. "What do you think you're doing, huh?"

"Taking care of you," Chuuya breathes, brushing his lips over Dazai's.

“Feels more like… torture to me,” Dazai gets out before another vicious clench around his cock makes his head fall back.

“What is it that you always tell me?” Chuuya wonders and hums innocently. The tips of his fingers trace the curve of Dazai’s bare neck, the caress of them so light that his skin shudders. “I believe it is… *patience is a virtue.* Or is that just for show?*”*

“I’m patient. I’m very patient.” Now it might not be the most honest thing to say considering Dazai’s desperately trying – and failing – to push Chuuya down on his dick, get him to move a little, give him enough friction to fall over the edge, but for someone who spent the whole day surrendering himself to a mindless force of nature, Chuuya’s surprisingly and unfairly strong.

Chuuya smiles breathlessly before leaning closer and stealing a slick, warm kiss from him. “You’re also a liar.” Both of his thumbs settle on the sides of his wind-pipe, just sitting there for a moment, waiting for permission or denial. Dazai still has enough sense left to be curious, wanting to test the waters, so all he does is stare back into Chuuya’s half-lidded, bleary eyes, and challenge him to go first – to show that he *does* care, that Dazai hasn’t broken him completely enough to care so little about himself that he doesn’t mind being lied to.

“Come on,” Chuuya whispers, grinding his hips in agonizingly slow circles. “Don’t you want it? A small taste of death?”

Dazai’s eyelids droop with tension – everything, from his body to his guts, is so tight, waiting for something, yearning, craving the peak so intensely that the wait alone feels like an orgasm but in slow motion. If that is how Chuuya takes care of him, then he can do it all day long every day.

“I’m perfectly fine where… I am right now,” he rasps and weakly bucks up into Chuuya, gasping when the heat around him drags just right. “Do whatever you want with me. I’m entirely yours.”

He hears Chuuya make a choked noise before his fingers tighten around him, enough to reduce the world to the sound of his heart pulsing in his ears. “*Liar*.”

The sudden lack of oxygen makes the pleasure that he is swimming in that much thicker; Dazai feels like he is going to sink through the car, through the earth, and to the bottom of the planet, and he wouldn’t even mind.

He can't see, his eyes too far back in his head, can't hear anything but the slam of his pulse – the only thing he feels is Chuuya, his heat, his movements, the push of his fingers, his mouth pressing against the corner of his mouth over and over, and all he can do is open his mouth and surrender himself. To the pleasure. To the two of them. To Chuuya.

He doesn't fall over the edge, doesn't tumble or drop – it's more of a glide down, smooth and steady and long. So gloriously long that Dazai can't even begin to figure out where it begins and where it ends.

He just knows that at some point in time, Chuuya moans, right against the shell of his ear and shudders before the rocking sensation that has been keeping him submerged in pure bliss comes to a stuttered stop, and instead, he just floats above the surface, limbs spread, facing the sun and the sky and the air all around him.

Half of eternity might as well pass before Dazai pries his eyelids open, still in the same exact position as when he closed them: resting against the car seat and clinging to Chuuya who is dead weight atop of him.

It's a good position. He likes it. Chuuya is a furnace, radiating fire, and his heaviness is more grounding than any whiff of coke he has ever inhaled; even his scent – sweat, musk, and the lightest note of blood – is addicting, enough to –

"Stop sniffing me," Chuuya suddenly mumbles, voice muffled by skin. "'s weird."

As if he wasn't doing the same exact thing not too long ago,

Ignoring him, Dazai buries his nose against Chuuya's neck and takes a deep breath. "I can do whatever I want."

"I thought *I* could do whatever I want with you."

"Sure," Dazai murmurs, "so stop me if you care that much. But I don't think you will." And to demonstrate, he parts his lips and drags the flat of his tongue over the strip of Chuuya's neck, closing his mouth to suck when he reaches his soft little earlobe.

As expected, Chuuya does absolutely nothing to stop him. His ass does clench around Dazai's softened cock, and it makes both of them shudder a little.

"Chuuya is delicious," Dazai whispers with a wistful sigh and drags his

mouth over Chuuya's cheek, then takes a small bite – a nibble. "I want to spend days tasting every part of your body." Chuuya shifts. "Until I can paint a picture of you with my mouth alone."

"Stop it," Chuuya hisses half-heartedly before pushing Dazai back with a hand over his mouth. He still looks half out of it. Pupils wide and endless. Only five more orgasms and a day of sleep can fix that.

Dazai plays along, for now, only playfully lifting his brows in response.

Chuuya helplessly shakes his head and drops his gaze somewhere to the ground between them. "You're the worst thing that has ever happened to me." Dazai hums against his palm. His hands slowly slide down the elegant slope of Chuuya's back though, memorizing, savoring, apologizing. "You're *selfish* and manipulative, and a damn control freak and every second word out of your stupid fucking mouth is a lie, and somehow I *still* want you." His breath catches, like the words, are as much of a shock to him as they are to Dazai. "You were just blabbering whatever earlier, but I'm not; you own me. I can't even think of leaving because I *belong* to you. I'm *yours."*

Dazai has owned countless things throughout his life – riches, clothes, and people – but he has never quite owned something like Chuuya; someone who gives himself over so willingly, so *lovingly,* to him. It seems wrong. Yet it feels so good.

Chuuya stares at him, eyes clouded with corruption's after-shock, forehead glistening, and bangs damp from sweat, searching for something in Dazai, but he never takes his hand off his mouth. He never lets Dazai speak.

And so Dazai doesn't.

***

Four endless hours later, they are in the bathtub.

They managed to find their way back to the winery in one piece, but that is as far as the calm lasted. As soon as they stepped into their secluded house, Chuuya fell over him again, demanding Dazai replace the corruption sizzling in his veins with himself. Against the wall. On the washing machine. On the floor. On the bed. And when that wasn't enough to fill the yawning chasm inside him either, Dazai offered himself for the taking and let Chuuya fuck him until they were both dizzy in the head.

Now, Dazai has to pinch his own arm every few seconds to keep his eyes open. Every bone sits like lead in his body, dragging him down into the darkness; judging by Chuuya's listless breathing, he doesn't feel much better. The problem is that going to sleep means getting out of the tub, and Dazai isn't strong enough to do that.

"I don't think," he says, absently playing with the ends of Chuuya's hair, "that Rimbaud and Verlaine will invite us to come up here again."

The lukewarm water sploshes in response. "They're in the house next door. They didn't hear us."

"Oh, I assure you. You were loud enough that people all the way in the neighboring city could hear you."

"Shut up." Then, after another moment: "How'd you find them here anyway?"

"I have my ways."

"Have you kept in contact with them the entire time?"

"Not the entire time," Dazai admits. "Just for the last four or so years – and 'keeping contact' is very generous. I saw them once before today. That's it."

"Why?" Chuuya asks him.

"I wanted to know the truth about my past. About both of ours."

"And you never thought of reaching out to me?" It's not an accusation, no; exhaustion has peeled away all of Chuuya's layers to reveal that it's just curiosity. He has always been rather hungry for truths and for secrets.

"I wasn't the boss back then. Reaching out to you meant exposing you – us – to all the bosses before me, and, Chuuya sweetheart, I didn't really feel like becoming part of a two-men-army with you that those men would have used for their own benefit."

Scoffing, Chuuya rests the back of his head against Dazai's shoulder. "Maybe that's for the best. Pairing us two up when we were sixteen wouldn't have ended well for anyone."

"No," Dazai agrees, the bittersweet taste of the truth trickling into his

lungs, “it wouldn’t have.”

“But you’ve been the boss for two years now,” Chuuya points out after several more minutes. He cranes his neck to shoot Dazai a look over his shoulder. “Why wait that long?”

“I was practically a child who had stolen the boss’ seat – he had his flaws but he was good at his job. Clever. Respected. Do you honestly believe that would have been the right time to introduce you, the leader of the port mafia’s rival organization – into our ranks?”

“Well, if you say it like that…”

“No one was ready for you.”

No one, and especially not Dazai.

It took time to gulp down the resentment that comes with the knowledge that life is practically written *for* you rather than *by* you. Dazai wanted to resist his place in this universe out of sheer spite. A magic book with blank pages couldn’t possibly tell him how to live and who to love when he didn’t even know himself.

Eventually, though, he realized that resisting was redundant. And the moment he accepted his role, everything somehow fell into place.

But it wasn’t really until Chuuya snapped, *“I don’t care if there is some damn flower out there that prefers to bloom in the darkness. Do I look like a flower to you?”* that Dazai realized no script out there, no matter how fancy, could create a pull this palpable. Chuuya wasn’t a plot device or a character. Chuuya was real. Chuuya *is* real.

And it took a long time to become ready. But he is.

He is ready for this.

For Chuuya.

“I wouldn’t have been ready for you either,” Chuuya admits quietly.

A smile tugs at Dazai’s mouth. “You weren’t ready in the chapel either.”

“Yeah, well,” Chuuya lets out a breath that’s deep enough for the both of them before casting his gaze skyward, “no one’s ever ready, but I am now.”

And all it took were months, his friends, and a part of his soul. He was *made* ready through claws and bones and blood.

Dazai is undeserving of it, but he has never cared much about that. Deservingness is a flawed concept anyway; there are no scales that make sure everyone gets their equal share of happiness and pain. No one gives a fuck about justice as soon as it's about them. So why should it stand in the way of something precious, something that's brighter than the last twenty years of nightfall?

Tucking his chin into the crook of Chuuya's shoulder, Dazai lets him feel the curve of his lips. "You're mine. For the next three years, you're completely and utterly *mine*."

Chuuya shudders against him.

"Does that scare you?" Dazai wants to know, winding his arms tighter around him, giving Chuuya a demonstration of just how much *his* he is.

He feels Chuuya's heartbeat – one steady thud after another. "No."

"Hm." His head tilts to the side, pressing his lips to Chuuya's neck. Their bodies are too heavy to do anything other than sleep for the next eight hours, so it's not teasing, not physical affection either; it's just – Dazai wasn't lying when he said how much he likes Chuuya's scent. The taste of his skin. He could bury himself against him for hours and never feel sated. It's too addicting. "It should," he eventually murmurs.

Chuuya's ribcage sags against Dazai. "I know."

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"You really can't stay for another day longer?"

"As much as we wish to extend our vacation, Verlaine-san, we, sort of, have a war going on back at home," Dazai chirps back at the adult man that stares at the two of them like a sullen child.

Apparently, they *weren't* loud enough to get banned from their homes. They will have to change that during the next visit.

"I know," Verlaine replies with a sigh, gaze sliding to Chuuya, who is wolfing down his breakfast – technically, it's three in the afternoon, but it's their first meal of the day – and rubbing his chest. "But it feels

like we've barely even gotten to spend any time with you."

Chuuya swallows loudly and huffs. "It's not like we're actually related or anything like that. Harboring the same kind of monstrosity inside us doesn't make us besties who have tea together and tell each other about our lives."

Verlaine's mouth pulls into a thin line. Rimbaud squeezes his shoulder on his way to the sink, a gesture of comfort that's meant to soothe the whip of Chuuya's blunt words.

"And the war," Dazai adds, feeling an odd pinch of pity for the man. "It's bad. Lots of people are dying."

That earns him a side-eye, but at least Chuuya doesn't push any further.

"If you ever need help," Rimbaud says then. "Strategic help, I mean – I doubt we'd be much help for you on the field these days. Do not hesitate to call us."

Dazai gives him a nod of acknowledgment. "We appreciate that, Rimbaud-san. Thank you."

"Yeah," Chuuya finishes the last piece of his eggs with a resolute exhale, "thanks."

Dazai turns his head to him. "Are you ready?"

"I am," Chuuya tells him, the words hovering between them for a moment, more than the answer to just one question.

Both Rimbaud and Verlaine make a point of accompanying them out on the porch. Dazai's security team is already waiting in the car; properly clothed this time.

Now he has never been the biggest fan of the heat – too heavy, too much, too inescapable – but he thinks he could get used to this one. Someday. That never-ending summer heat. He could just lie down on the grass, spread his arms and his legs, and let it shine down on him until all his scars would vanish and he would be fixed.

Yeah, that sounds nice.

"Hey, Chuuya," Verlaine says, and Dazai turns to watch Chuuya do the same. The Frenchman offers him the hat. Chuuya gave it back to

him earlier, but apparently, that wasn't necessary. "Here. Take this."

"Are you sure?" Chuuya asks, hesitant. "It's yours."

"I have no need for it anymore." Again, that flicker of a candle used to be a forest fire. A domesticated predator reminiscing about his good old days – that took more than they gave, but nonetheless, they *gave.* "I'm sure you could use it better than me."

After another moment, Chuuya grabs the hat but doesn't let go. "Thank you." *Not just for the hat, go*es unsaid. "I'll take good care of it." He gives Rimbaud a nod too before spinning around and catching up to Dazai without looking back again.

Dazai sucks in one final breath and pockets it deep inside himself. It will have to keep him sustained for the next five years. "Time to go home."

Chapter End Notes

> Warnings: conversations about suicide, suicidal ideation, explicit sexual content

Chapter 35: The King

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Well, now that you have me all to yourself. What do you want to do?”

“Hm, let’s see,” Yuan says, looking down at the naked man in her bed that she is currently straddling and pursing her lips to pretend she is thinking about it. “How about…” She leans down to brush their lips together. It’s a shallow kiss, but that’s okay; the purpose is demonstration only anyways. “… this?”

Playing along, Albatross hums. “I don’t know about that one. Maybe you should give it another try?”

“Another try, huh? Okay.” The next kiss lasts longer even though she still keeps it deliberately light, not giving in to that pull in her stomach *yet.* When she draws away, she raises her brow in question. “Thoughts?”

“Ahhhh… hmph… well…” And then all of a sudden, he lunges for her waist, pulling her down, rolling them around, and taking what he wants which is a kiss, a real one, that leads to another one and another one until Yuan stops counting and surrenders herself to this fleeting feeling of weightlessness that tricks her into thinking everything is really as simple as fucking the guy who has somehow turned into an oddly important friend over the last month.

The reality is much different.

Her pocket starts vibrating. Albatross hums and squeezes her ass like it’s a toy that she brought to bed. Knowing that it’s the complete opposite, Yuan pushes him off her to fish out the phone in her jeans and press it to her ear. “Yes?”

“Command expects you at the base in an hour.” The person on the other end doesn’t introduce herself — she never does — but Yuan has been picking up these kinds of calls for too many weeks not to recognize that it’s Thanh-ha, one of Kouyou’s most trusted girls and the one in charge of all administrative matters. “You have a new target.”

Yuan's heart picks up its pace, drums hard and loud in her chest, and she closes her eyes to savor that sensation. "Got it. I'll be there."

The line goes dead without another word.

"Didn't you just come back from a mission like… three hours ago?"

Albatross is still half-sprawled over her, so she has to wiggle out from under him with a grunt to climb off the bed. "Do you think Kouyou cares about that?" she counters and while it's not the entire truth, it's not a lie either.

Kouyou has perfected her expression to such a degree that it's hard to get a read of her but even Yuan could see the pleased glimmer that hushed through her gaze when Yuan came to her that night, mascara smudged around her bloodshot eyes, veins brimming with the Vodka she drank to drown her sorrows but everything else empty, and begged her to take her back under her wing, to give her something to do, something to hold onto before her grief consumed her.

Her voice, when she took Yuan into her arms and held her for five magical and surreal minutes, was nothing short of *satisfied,* the grand finale to the lecture she gave Yuan the day she returned to the port mafia to ask Chuuya for his help to save the sheep. *It's pointless trying to outrun the darkness in you. Instead of fighting it, give in and thrive on it, and everything else will fall into place. You will see.*

Sure, it was Yuan who asked for the continuation of her training and all the jobs that came with it, seeking the exhaustion that came from the long hours, the mental strain, and the physical toll on her body this time. But it was Kouyou who took in the broken little birdie that fell down on her porch and agreed to turn it into a dragon.

Swinging one arm behind his neck, Albatross makes a face. "I mean, yeah, okay, that's a point." Then his expression turns more serious and Yuan turns away to look for the shirt she lost here somewhere on the floor. This is fun. Something other than work to get her mind off things and let loose without damaging her body with liquor and drugs in the process. She would prefer to keep it that way. "Don't let her push you around though. Tell her if it gets too much. She'll respect you more if you do."

"Oh, Charles," she says dramatically and shoots him a half-lidded grin over her shoulder. "You are so adorable when you talk about things you have no clue of."

His eyes narrow into a squint. What she likes best about him is his ability to let all forms of negativity bounce off him like flimsy grasshoppers and always find something good from them. Probably because all that she has left *is* negativity, and while she is distantly aware of that fact, it's still nice to pretend otherwise sometimes.

"I have, more or less, grown up with her, you know. We're like half-siblings. Cousins. Friends of friends."

"Yup, exactly my point," she says and only waves him goodbye on her way out of the room.

Because little does he know is that getting pushed around and worked to the bone is *exactly* what she wants. It is as simple as that.

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"Hirota Mari." To put a face to the name, Kouyou slaps a folder with a photograph in it in front of her. "Thirty-two years old. Part of the main mafia clan that rules over Osaka."

At this, Yuan's eyes lift to her. She stomps out of the obvious flicker of surprise on her own face — training her out of putting every single emotion that runs through her on blast was the first thing Kouyou did after she begged her way back inside her good graces — but judging by Kouyou's flat-lined mouth, she is too late.

"While I wish you would be less obvious about it, you *are* thinking in the right direction: this is about the Mafiosi that you and the boss unofficially took care of a while back," Kouyou says and raps her sharp nail against the document. "Your friends tattled to the wrong people, so now we have to clean up their mess to avoid starting a second war. I plan to put you in charge of it."

There it is again: that sickening thump of her heart. It slams so wildly that Yuan feels like it will jump up her throat and clog her airway any moment now.

"Like *in charge in charge?"* she asks and clears her throat to sound less like a chain smoker and more like the confident and delicate oleander flower which turns to poison when touched that Kouyou wants her to be.

"Use your words, not meaningless gibberish," the woman scolds softly.

"I meant are you planning to put me in charge of the entire

operation?" Yuan's eyes scan the information on the paper. There is little information about the man himself which makes sense considering he is mafia. Most of the documents are reports from their intelligence unit. Apparently, they have been tracking their whereabouts for the last few weeks already. "This is… big." Like 'one wrong move and it will trigger a second conflict and countless deaths' kind of big' but she keeps that to herself this time.

Kouyou slowly moves through the room. When she speaks, it's somewhere behind and above Yuan — a dangerous position to be in with enemies. "Do you not feel ready to take it on?"

Not in the slightest.

Every second that she spends working under Kouyou, she is afraid.

Yuan is scared all the time. Scared of doing something wrong, of not being good, fast, or strong enough, of having to do something that will cripple her soul.

And while that was something that made this job hell when life outside of the mafia was still an option, now it is the very thing keeping her alive on most days. This all-consuming, *living* fear.

"I think I can," she says. "I also think that it's risky to put this responsibility on me, and you, Kouyou-san, do not seem like the kind of person to be reckless."

When Kouyou steps out of the shadows and back into her vision, it's with a small but nonetheless gratifying smile that makes Yuan feel like an impressionable teacher's pet receiving a good noodle star for proper behavior. "This is not only about putting your training to a test but about optics. You've integrated… well into the mafia society so far but as far as the majority is concerned, you're still the black sheep, and you will continue to be so until you prove your loyalties once and for all.

"Take Chuuya-kun for example. He is slowly growing into a respectable leader and executive because of the ruthlessness he has shown in the war. Even the Colonel, the most conservative executive who was against the alliance to the sheep from the start, has started taking a liking to him for his decisions in battle and politics."

Yuan crosses her arms in front of her chest, not a fan of the direction this is going. "When have I been anything but loyal?"

“When you deserted the mafia and joined the Bishop’s Staff.”

“I never joined them. I came back and –”

“These are semantics that no one pays attention to,” Kouyou cuts in. “All they get from that story is that you left and that the people you went to betrayed the mafia to the people we are currently at war with. Do you understand what sort of picture this paints?”

She doesn’t like it but she nods. “Still. You can’t possibly expect me to be like…” She makes a vague hand gesture. “… like Chuuya.” His name comes out in a hiss. “We are not exactly operating in the same ranks. He’s off with the damn boss all the time and I’m *here*.”

Kouyou cocks her head, a deceptively curious gesture. “And by *here* you believe that our unit is beneath the 33rd floor?”

“I mean, isn’t it? The boss is the boss, and we are us. Hierarchy is everything in the mafia. Isn’t that how it works?”

Kouyou lets out a quiet, hollow chuckle that she smothers in the dazzling confines of her wide sleeves, and for a moment, Yuan hears. She hears what she would sound like if she didn’t have that fear anymore. If she just let herself fall into the yawning jaws of oblivion.

Is that what happened to Kouyou?

Yuan has heard whispers about the girl she used to be once. Apparently, just as opinionated and bright-eyed as every other child before the port mafia gets their hands on them. But that’s all those were. Whispers. No one here would ever actually dare to speak against someone as respectable as Kouyou Ozaki — even if what they say is the truth. Yuan tried to ask Albatross once but he shrugged it off and awkwardly explained that it’s not his place to go around sharing other people’s secrets.

Dazai would probably tell Chuuya if he asked. She isn’t sure why that thought bothers her so much.

“You still have so much to learn, Yu-chan. I will let you in on a secret.” Kouyou’s smile grows but instead of making her face softer, it paints her in a bloody shade of red. “Power does not lie in the hands of the one at the very top. Sometimes it lies in the shadows. Other times it lies in the people that keep the symbol of the leader in place. True power, my darling child, is having it without anyone seeing it.”

Her head tilts heavenward as if remembering a fond memory before she looks back at Yuan. “Or do you think that our boss would still have his precious throne if someone didn’t work tirelessly to ensure it stays that way?”

Yuan presses her lips together. There are many things she could say to that, but for once she keeps her many lessons in mind; one of them is not to speak if she has nothing valuable to contribute.

Seemingly satisfied, Kouyou folds her hands together with a sigh. “While you are right that Chuuya-kun’s position is not comparable to yours, I suggest eliminating that kind of thought process, Yu-chan. His position looks flashier in the spotlight but behind closed doors, he spends the majority of his time taking care of a man-child. Meanwhile, you have the chance to end a war before it has even begun. *That* is power.”

“What do I need to do?”

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His position looks flashy in the spotlight but behind closed doors, he spends the majority of his time taking care of a man-child.

The sentence rings through her head still six hours later even though out here, her mind should be nowhere but on what’s right in front of her. Specifically: her targets.

Hirota Mari is only one of the few dozen Mafiosi from Osaka that have been scouring the streets but he is the ring-leader of the group. Based on the port mafia’s intelligence it’s a relatively small task force, most likely not here to start an offensive war but to meddle in the one that is already happening, then reap the benefits.

That doesn’t mean that they can’t call for reinforcements though, which makes Yuan’s job all the more complicated and terrifying. The goal is to not only stop them but eliminate their reason for being here. If she fails…

Let’s just say that failure is not an option.

This means she should keep her attention on the dim-lit alley down below only but since Hirota hasn’t left the bar yet that he’s been regularly visiting to trade information about the port mafia.

What the hell did Kouyou mean by ‘Chuuya spends most of his time

taking care of a man-child?'

Her fingers itch to reach inside her jacket, get out her cell phone and call Chuuya to ask him that. Or just to *talk* to him like they used to do before everything became so fucked up. About everything and anything. Or ask him to be here with her, not because she thinks she will fail but because being scared has always been so much easier with Chuuya by her side.

But they don't do that anymore.

Hell, Chuuya can barely even look at her these days. Having an honest conversation with him at this point is a damn pipe dream.

Her tantrum when he suddenly appeared in her place – his place… or their place… obviously didn't help but what was she supposed to do? He spends weeks without uttering a single word to her, abandoning her like she is *nothing* when she could use a fucking friend the most, and then shows up out of nowhere, acting like everything is all right? Accept the scraps she's given? No fucking way. She might have grown up a stray on the streets but of all the things the streets cost her, her self-worth was not one of them.

She deserves an explanation.

She deserves an apology.

She deserves *better*.

Yuan understands grief and how it corrupts people. It is corrupting her. But she refuses to understand whatever the hell has made Chuuya go from the person he once was — kind, protective and caring — to *that*. Whether it's guilt or his 'duties' or Dazai or whether it was the thing that took over and killed all their friends. It doesn't matter. Every day he still has the choice to wake up and be a decent human being, and every day so far, he has made the wrong one.

Down below, the door of the underground bar opens and Hirota comes strolling out, cigarette in his mouth and a plain black coat around his shoulders. Holding her breath, Yuan presses herself back against the wall of the balcony she's perched on, blending into the shadows.

She's about to move to the next phase of her mission when she catches a rustle of movement on the fire escape staircase on the other side of the alley. Her eyes narrow. Sure enough, she sees someone move in

the shadows just like her.

Now it might be an innocent civilian who chose the wrong moment to sneak out at night, but Yuan's instincts have been sharpened into razor blades both by life and by Kouyou's claws. That person is not simply a passerby and they are not innocent either.

She makes the hasty decision to pursue the intruder first. If it's someone from the Osaka clan, then they're already onto her, and going after Hirata would not only be useless but a suicide mission. If it's someone else… well, then she best figure out *who* to decide whether to dispose of them or suggest a temporary alliance. More likely than not, it's going to be the former.

She bolts down her own fire escape staircase and chases after the shadow, who seems to finally notice her presence as they start to move that much faster. They bolt around the corner. Legs long and familiar enough to know their way around here in one of Yokohama's hotbeds for crime and corruption, but so does Yuan. Not only that, but she is not alone. Because a mission this important comes with backup that she can call in over her throat mic so they block the alley that their little friend tries to use to escape.

Cornered, they turn around, head moving back and forth.

Yuan doesn't hesitate. Not this time. She runs and runs and runs and before they can try to climb the walls or start pummeling, she is throwing herself at them.

"Who are you?" she hisses.

The body under her goes completely still.

It's just a tactic, she tells herself, and jams her elbow into their airway that much harder. *Do not let them fool you with a surprise maneuver.*

"Speak!"

Except that when they do finally open their mouth and croak out an answer, it's Yuan who freezes.

"Yuan?"

"Shirase?"

That's Shirase's voice.

She tears away the face mask covering his face and –

It is him.

Shirase.

That's Shirase's face staring back at her with wide, blinking eyes.

He opens his mouth again but Yuan moves first. Within a second, she is pointing the barrel of a gun at him.

"WHAT THE FUCK!" he – the person exclaims under her. "Why are you pointing a gun at me?! It's me! *Shirase!"*

"I know whose face you're wearing," she hisses, refusing to back down for even a second. "What I don't know is why or what ability you're using to do it. You're not Shirase because Shirase is dead, so *speak*. Who are you and what do you want?!"

"It's me! I swear, it's me! You have to believe m—"

She jams the butt of her gun against his nose. Blood starts gushing out. The person lets out a shocked wail.

"I don't have to do *anything*. Now either you tell me who you are or I'll blow your damn brain out!"

"You wet your bed until you were nine years old!" he suddenly shouts and Yuan's grip on her gun wavers dangerously. "No one knew because you always woke up before anyone else, but I caught you one time and you made me swear not to ever tell anyone! Would a fake Shirase know this about you?! Would they know that you went back to your home every week and watched your mom from afar for years after leaving? Or that you can't whistle for the life of you? Or that –"

"Shut up," she hisses, but when her fingers fly to clutch his face, they tremble silently, terrified that if she tries to touch him, he will dissolve into the air because surely this can't be real. Surely, he can't actually be here.

But her fingertips graze his cheeks, and he is still here, still staring at her with that mixture of bewilderment and exasperation, and still *alive*.

Then she's throwing her arms around his neck and burying her face in his shoulder. Tears pool in her eyes, staining both their faces and

mixing with the grime and dirt of the ground below them, but she doesn't care because Shirase is alive.

"Finally," she hears him mutter, his arms winding around her to return the hug. The fact that they are doing this — hugging—is as surreal as the fact that he is *here*. "I thought that you'd make all your threats come true and actually kill me this time."

"You *died*," she whispers and finally breaks away from him to properly look at him: same face, same skin, same silver hair, just… a little dirtier and rougher and shorter. "I thought you were dead. How is this possible?"

"You *thought*," he huffs. "How many times did I tell you not to believe everything you hear?"

She shakes her head, not understanding. "The building collapsed on itself. They didn't find your bodies but… how?"

"A risky jump out of the window, a bad fall, a broken arm, and, of course, my genius self. That's how."

Someone clears their throat.

It's Tohru, one of Yuan's team members and the person that blocked Shirase from leaving just now. "Hirata is already halfway to the motel he's staying at. You have another five minutes but then our window of opportunity closes."

And if that happens, Yuan will have failed because tomorrow everything could already look different. She can't let that happen. Her eyes flicker to Shirase heaving himself up into an upright position. Even if she wants to know where the hell he has been and why he is here now. Her questions will have to wait for later.

"Let's move then," she tells Tohru and the others before rising to her feet and holding out her hand to Shirase to help him do the same. "Come with me. Help me with something, so we can talk afterward."

"You're going after the Osaka mafia members, aren't you?" he surprisingly asks her, dusting off his trousers.

So he was waiting for Hirota, too.

Yuan signals him to get going. They set into a jog. "Yeah. How did you know about them?"

“C’mon now. You know how it is on the streets. People talk.”

“So that’s where you…” Her lungs burn. She has been doing a lot of cardio training since restarting her work under Kouyou but it takes more than a month to build stamina. “… you’ve been all this time?”

Shirase’s breath, on the other hand, remains remarkably steady as they sprint through the alleys, taking shortcuts so they will arrive at Hirota’s destination before he will. The original plan was to overwhelm him here, in the dark where no one will see and if they do, they will look away, but plans change, which means that they will have to get him somewhere at the motel.

She feels him look at her from the side but he doesn’t say anything. His silence is confirmation enough. The question that remains is *why?* Why the hell would he hide in the streets without telling them — or Yuan, at least — that he’s alive? The pain that he could have spared her…

Not all of it but a significant part of it. He’s always been like a brother to her. An annoying one that makes her want to throttle him sometimes but a brother nonetheless.

Yet apparently, that’s how it goes these days. The people you consider family stop talking to you and you can either scream yourself hoarse trying to get through to them or save your energy and move on.

When they arrive at the shabby three-star motel, lungs heaving, Shirase looks at her. “What now?”

Yuan forces herself to bite back a snappish response about what he was planning to do with Hirota because there simply isn’t enough time to bicker right now. Instead, she takes off the dark overcoat and her cap, gives her other two team members a nod to go be on standby, and shoves them into Shirase’s hands. “Now you find yourself a dark corner to hide while I finish this. Only come out once I’m done, got it?”

“You sure you want him to see what you look like?” Shirase pointedly nods at her hair. “The pink’s not exactly forgettable.”

Her face, when she meets his eyes, is blank. “It doesn’t matter what he sees. After we’re done, he won’t be able to tell anyone.”

Shirase blinks, swallows audibly, and finally turns to take cover somewhere.

The motel's entrance is located in another back alley, right across from a small grocery store and a tattoo parlor which are both closed by now. The position is important. Another one of Kouyou's lessons. Every angle, every step, every look — all of it determines the outcome of the mission.

Yuan leans against the wall that faces the motel building and fishes out a pack of cigarettes and a silver lighter. Her thumb pushes the button a few times. When it refuses to spark for the fourth time in a row, she curses under her breath and glances around.

That's when Hirota strolls into view, passing her without a single glance in her direction, his hands in his pockets.

"Excuse me, sir," she calls out, pushing off the wall. "Do you happen to have a lighter for me?" Rolling her eyes, she wiggles the one in her hand. "Dumb thing always stops working when I need it most."

Hirota scans her. It's subtle, a swift flicker of his eyes, but since she is doing the same thing, she sees it. But all that he sees is a young, civilian girl with pink hair, a crop top that shows off her navel and the two piercings glinting on her skin, and a sheepish smile. Nothing dangerous, let alone a threat from his enemies.

"Sure," he says and fishes out a lighter from his pocket, raising it to the cigarette stuck between her lips and waiting until she leans forward to light it for her. The butt sparks, Yuan takes a drag and offers him a thankful smile and a nod.

Hirota watches her blow out the smoke with a violating hunger that makes her stomach curl in dread, images of the trip to Osaka flashing in front of her eyes. Then he offers her the lighter and winks. "Keep it. Such a pretty thing like you doesn't have to talk to strangers anymore."

Yeah, because strangers like him end up being mafia members without a conscience who trade human lives for money.

She bets knowing that makes him feel oh so satisfied with himself.

And yet, he is the one who has made the mistake of talking to a stranger.

Her expression betrays none of these thoughts. She only presses out a bashful laugh, the one that comes naturally whenever old, creepy men say random things to her that she has no answer to. "Thanks."

After another nod, he finally turns her back to her, and Yuan's smile grows because the pack of cigarettes not only contains her cigarettes but a syringe, and it feels oddly satisfying to feel the round, plastic shape between her fingers as she takes it out and goes in for the kill.

One, two, three light steps, and she is raising her hand. Hirota is a head taller than her, so she has to be extra certain of her movements, extra forceful with her movements, and extra quick.

But his neck is right there, and the syringe comes down on it, and she just has to –

Hirota's head snaps to the side, away from the syringe as his hand flies to his neck. Yuan freezes. When he turns to her, he looks nothing like the man who offered her his lighter with a slimy grin. This one is pure evil.

Oh no, no, no, no.

Panic floods her head, and along with it a thousand questions. What did she do wrong? What happened? What does she do now? And most importantly: holy shit, she fucked up.

To continue standing there, rooted to the spot, and watch herself fail without doing something about it so tempting, but –

Her fight instinct has always been just a tiny bit faster. Once again, it kicks in at the same time as Hirota's mouth twists into a snarl and he moves to grab her.

Yuan stabs the syringe into his neck again, pushing down on it lightning-quickly. using the tiny window of shocked pain to jump out of the way. This time, he doesn't move. This time, it actually works and after another garbled groan, he slumps to the ground like a sack of rice.

Yuan stares down at him.

She did it.

She somehow did it.

She only notices that her feet are still frozen stiff when the noises of her surroundings rush back in — the night wind, the muffled sounds of cars somewhere out on the roads, her own breathing, and her team. Shirase.

“What’s the next step?” Tohru asks her with a stern but flat look.

They are here to help but not to do her job. This is supposed to be her show. And freezing is not part of it.

Yuan gulps down a breath and jumps back into action. “We’ll get him to the car,” she says, leaning down to hoist Hirota up and slide one of his arms around her shoulder. “If anyone asks, he just had one drink too many.”

The person that ends up helping her out is Shirase.

Together they more or less drag the man to the car that’s waiting for them on the side curb.

It’s messy.

The whole thing.

She should have gotten Hirota down on the first try. She got lucky this time but she might not get the next. She should have overwhelmed him much earlier, not right in front of the motel where someone like his fellow Mafiosi could glimpse out of the window and see her at work. And she shouldn’t have to rely on others to get the target to a car either. The whole ingenious premise of Kouyou’s unit is the fact that each of her girls is as valuable as ten whole mafioso grunts. Fifteen even. They don’t do messy. They are quick, skilled, and suave. They are poison hiding behind pretty faces and candy-coated smiles.

But Hirota still ends up in the trunk of her car, and even if Yuan's work currently isn't perfect, she'll get better at it. She will.

“You okay?” Shirase asks after she slams the trunk shut.

“Perfect,” she says without waiting for him to follow her.

Her team members linger outside on the curb, looking bored as they exchange words in low murmurs. Tohru slides her a knowing glance though. “You have to be quicker. If you only inject half of the syringe, it won’t work as well.”

“I saw that,” Yuan tries to say with not nearly as much bitterness in her voice as she feels. “Next time, I will be.”

“Good. Do you need our help with this?”

“No, I’ve got it from here on out… and Tohru-san?”

The girl tips her head to the side.

“Can you not mention…” Yuan’s eyes flicker to Shirase who’s frowning at his feet. “… my friend to Kouyou until I’m finished? I want to tell her myself.”

“Very well. Be quick with this too. Kouyou expects a report by sunrise.”

Yuan nods, and that’s it.

Even though it’s only half of her mission, it’s still relief that replaces the hot, sticky air in her lungs on her next exhale. Especially as she nods at Shirase and they both climb inside the car.

Now it’s time to get some answers. From both men in the car.

She pulls the car out onto the streets. It’s silent for a few moments until…

“So, this is what you’ve been up to?”

Yuan casts a glance toward Shirase. His expression is more open and curious than judging, so she keeps her voice even. “Yeah. We have to take care of the Osaka mafia here before they start another war or meddle with the one that’s going on. What were *you* trying to do?”

Shirase’s gaze lowers to his hand as he fidgets with an unfamiliar bracelet around his wrist. “When I heard that some mafia gang from Osaka was here, I immediately knew who they were and why they were here. I wanted to make sure they wouldn’t try to start another damn trade ring here in Yokohama.”

“Shirase,” she says, not able to hold back anymore. “What were you doing all this time? Why didn’t you tell us you were alive?”

“Well, let me think. Oh. How about that the last time I reached out to the mafia, most of my friends *died?”*

Yuan’s fingers clench around the steering wheel. She whispers, “It was an accident.” Or, at least, that’s what she has been told. Not by Chuuya, of course, but by the port mafia who had to explain the sudden death and disappearance of so many of her people at once. An accident caused by something *in* Chuuya that no one could have foreseen or controlled. Not even him.

“Well, the streets think otherwise,” Shirase mutters. “And I had to think of our safety first. Running back to the port mafia didn’t seem like the wisest option back then. Still doesn’t if I’m being honest.”

“The mafia I understand but why didn’t you tell *us?”*

“We thought you had died too!”

“What?” Blinking, she stares at him. And then – “Wait, what do you mean *we?”* One thing she learned in the last few months is that hope is the most dangerous thing and yet, she can’t stop herself from clinging to it now that it’s here — so close in hand reach. “Did someone else…?”

He lifts his eyes to her and smiles crookedly. “Would we be the sheep if we hadn’t?”

“Shirase!”

“Rin and Misao got out, too.” Then his expression weakens a little. “Akira, he – he almost made it but his legs were crushed and –” He shrugs weakly. “His injuries were too bad. He died while I was carrying him on my back. So it’s just the three of us.”

Her eyes start stinging again, blurring her vision, but she wipes the tears away before they can fall. “That’s… that’s good. That’s amazing, you know? You’re alive.” She blindly reaches out to squeeze his hand. “The three of you are alive.”

“For what it’s worth, I’m glad you made it too. I tried to get to you but everything was falling down around us and it was either now or never and –”

“It’s fine.” She presses out a tight smile. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

Not by luck though or even by her own strength. She only survived because the mafia found her in the rubble and made a deal with the armed detective agency so their doctor could use her ability to save her.

“Yeah, I can see that now. But we tried searching for you, even afterward, and you were nowhere to be found. Not on the streets anyways.”

She tries to keep the flash of hurt out of her voice when she asks, “You didn’t think of looking for me in the mafia? I mean, I know you

probably didn't expect me to stay there but you could have asked *Chuuya –"*

"Chuuya who is bound to the boss' side?" Shirase cuts in wryly.

"It's still Chuuya no matter who he spends his time with," she makes herself say because explaining what happened to the two of them would take too long. "He could have told you." And maybe if he had known that Shirase, Rin, and Misao were still alive, he wouldn't have turned away from her.

"Like I said, the streets have a lot to say." She feels him slide a glance her way. "About your new boss too."

"Like?"

"Like that he is the one who's behind the Bishop's staff."

Her brows knit together. "I'm sorry *what?* That doesn't even make any sense. Have you not noticed that the port mafia and the Bishop's staff have been at war with each other?"

"Yeah, a war that has killed how many ability users so far? I'm just saying. If he was the mastermind behind it, then I doubt he minds all that death. It's perfect, actually. Letting ability users kill each other until there is no one left anymore but him."

"That's insane, Shirase."

"Is it?"

"You sound like De Luca."

At that, Shirase's face hardens. He exhales a vexed huff.

"It was De Luca by the way," she adds. "You know that, right? He shot one of Chuuya's team members and told him to give himself over. He triggered that… thing. It was De Luca."

"That thing," he echoes. "And what exactly is that thing?"

Yuan's lips flatten into a thin line.

"You don't know or you can't say?"

She wishes it was the latter, but.

“I have no idea,” she mutters, eyes glued to the road. “But it’s not like it’s a total surprise, is it? He’s had a few of those… attacks before. He had just never blown up before.”

“But does *he* know what it is? Does he know how to *protect* the people around him?”

“…”

“Yuan?”

“I don’t know,” she admits, shrugging with perhaps a bit too much force.

Shirase is silent for a moment, looking at her, and then… “Yuan, what’s going on? Is he okay? Is that why you don’t know anything?”

“Depends on your definition of okay.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that he’s physically safe and sound, but that hasn’t really talked to me since,” she snaps. Her eyes slide shut for a second immediately after. She sighs. “Sorry. It’s not your fault. I just… it’s been really hard. I feel like I lost all of you that day, and it’s been so… so goddamn *lonely.”*

Even when the crippling fear of her missions is keeping her alive or the hazy pleasure and entertainment that comes from fooling around with Albatross and Shion, nothing has been able to fill the hole in her heart where all her friends once used to be.

A moment later, she feels Shirase reach out and squeeze her arm. “I’m sorry, pink. I had no idea.” Then he huffs. “I’ll kick Chuuya’s ass. Who the hell does he think he is, huh?”

She can’t help but smile. “Does that mean you’ll come back with me?”

“Well, you obviously need me,” he says matter-of-factly. *Obviously.* “For now anyway. I don’t want the others to get worried.”

“They can come too. And you guys can stay and…” She trails off. “But you don’t want to, right?”

“I don’t trust the port mafia, Yuan. Something’s just not right.”

“It’s the mafia. Of course something’s not right.”

“No, I mean… I mean –” He ends up throwing up his hands and puffing out a huff. “I’ve kept us afloat by trading some insider info on the Bishop’s Staff on the streets and some of it points in the wrong friggin’ direction.”

“Trading information? That’s dangerous.”

“What, and kidnapping Osaka mafia members isn’t? Where are we going anyway?”

Her lips purse into a grim expression. “To a secure location where no one will find the man.”

“To do what?” When she doesn’t respond, he pinches her arm. She doesn’t grimace, even though it does sting, but her eyes flicker to him. “To do what, Yuan?”

“To torture a few answers out of him.”

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Six hours later

„Chuuya?”

He’s in the shower when he hears Yuan call him from outside the bathroom door.

“Chuuya, are you in there?”

“Don’t answer.”

And he is not alone.

In front of him, under the spray of water, is Dazai, eyes glinting down at him with only a bashfully short distance between their mouths — enough incentive to do as told: pretend not to hear that someone’s in his apartment and instead curl his arms around Dazai’s neck and lift on his tiptoes to kiss him.

Chuuya groans into it, pulse hard but steady in his ears as he tastes Dazai while water falls between them. It’s –

Knock, knock, knock. (Though he would call it more of a slam than a knock.)

“I need to talk to you. *Now.”*

Begrudgingly, Chuuya frees his mouth and bends his neck to yell, “I’m in the shower!”

He’s not even sure what Yuan would like to talk to him about so urgently considering their last conversation didn’t end really well.

A few moments pass, and when there is no answer, Chuuya lets out a breath, turning back to Dazai –

Only to hear the door open outside the bathtub curtains.

His eyes widen.

“It’s really important,” Yuan says, now in the same room. “Can you hurry up a little and come outside?”

Dazai makes a silent face at him, hands locking around Chuuya when he tries to step away, which earns him a warning scowl. “What’s so fucking important that it can’t wait?!” Before Yuan goes ahead and rips open the curtain — which she would, he finally frees himself from the bastard to stick his head out.

Yuan’s in her work clothes, and her cheeks are flushed with color. “I’ll tell you when you come out.” And then she pointedly looks at him. “So come out.”

“If it was so urgent, you’d tell me now,” he replies out of sheer stubbornness. “I’ll come out when I’m done, and I’m not done yet.”

Her eyes narrow into a glare.

Chuuya glowers right back.

“You’re so fucking –” Cutting herself off, she shakes her head and points a finger at him. “Hurry.”

And with that, she stalks out of the room again.

“What was that about?” Dazai asks once the door slams shut.

Chuuya turns back to him with a shrug, shoving his face under the spray again and closing his eyes in bliss. “No idea.”

“I didn’t know you were talking again,” Dazai murmurs, smearing the words over the slope of his shoulder down to his Adam's apple.

“We aren’t. Not really.” And it’s better that way. Fewer chances for Yuan to get hurt in his crossfire. “Last time I saw her she yelled at me.”

“How rude.”

Chuuya agrees with a hum and lets Dazai kiss it better, melting against him as their lips find each other again, slow and deep and slick with water.

He’s not sure how much time passes as they stand there, entranced only in each other and nothing else before he blinks his eyes open eventually. He’s already pushing it with Yuan, so it’s probably best to get out now…

But making out with Dazai is just so much better, so he dives in again, and again, and again, gorging on the man like an addict that has lost all sense of a life outside of his favorite drug — correction: not *like*. Turns out Dazai was meant to be his drug from the very beginning. How ironic.

Which is why it’s Dazai who ends up dragging him back with fingers in his hair. “Get out before your face becomes pruny.”

“Yours will get pruny first,” Chuuya mutters. “You’re closer to the water.”

“That’s not how it works.”

He only rolls his eyes because obviously that’s not how it works. He simply isn’t a fan of Dazai reminding him of his personal duties or whatever it is that Yuan wants from him. His scowl bleeds into an involuntary smile when Dazai smacks his ass on the way out.

“I’ll talk to her in the kitchen,” he says as he reaches for a towel to dry himself off. “So you can leave unnoticed.”

Dazai turns off the water and hums.

After drying himself off, Chuuya tightens the towel around his hips, and opens the door. The cool air outside is a much-needed relief from the steam of the shower, and yet, as he shuffles through his apartment in search of Yuan, he finds himself missing the heat. Dazai’s heat.

It’s strange that after all the revelations Dazai thrust at him in Meursault, Chuuya only fell so much deeper, and now he is practically

submerged. Dazai is his personal living, breathing quicksand. Except that he never wants to get out again.

He finds Yuan hovering between the guest room and the adjoining bathroom, her expression tightening when she sees him.

“Look, I had to wash my hair,” he starts to say as the first part of his rant about privacy and how he can’t just drop everything and run to her if she needs him. But then someone else steps out of the bathroom, and Chuuya’s voice dies inside his throat.

“Hey, dude,” says Shirase Buichirou, standing in front of him, whole and… alive.

Chuuya stares at him. Blinks. Then blinks again.

“I told you it was urgent,” he registers Yuan saying, but he is still too busy processing what he is seeing.

“You’re…” he stammers, lifting his hand to point at Shirase. “How are you – what is – how – what the fuck?”

Yuan sighs. “Yeah. Me too.”

Shirase crosses his arms in front of his chest and shrugs. He *shrugs* like his presence here isn’t the most absurd to have ever happened. “Heard that you’re acting like an ass, so I decided to drop by and pay you a visit.”

This time, Chuuya’s gaze snaps to Yuan.

She meets it without flinching and stares right back at him.

Chuuya shakes his head and looks at Shirase again. “How are you here?”

“Came in through the front door.”

“I mean how are you alive?!”

“That, my friend, is a long story,” he says, arms dropping to slide into the pockets of his tattered jeans. “How about I tell it over food? I’m starving.”

“Yeah, okay.” Chuuya moves on auto-pilot: nodding, grabbing pen and paper on the counter, and scribbling down a number. “Call them up, and order anything you want. I’ll just… I’ll put on some clothes real

quick."

He spins around and starts walking, the rapid pounding of his heart drowning out the low murmurs of Yuan and Shirase that he leaves behind. He doesn't go to the bedroom though. Instead, he ends up pacing through the hallway next to the bathroom where the door opens, Dazai walks out and Chuuya knows that it's this brief feeling of relief that brought him here, yet it's not enough to dispel the sickening rash of panic spreading in his chest, not enough to let the air pass into his lungs, and not enough to stop his vision from spinning as he starts gasping for breath harder and harder.

"Hey, hey, what's going on?" Dazai is right in front of him and his hands are on his face and he looks at him like he always does: this odd mixture of control and affection, so unbecoming for a man of his rank, and – "Talk to me. What happened?"

Chuuya shakes his head. "I don't –" The words are there but his voice isn't. "I can't – I can't breathe," he gasps out.

Pausing, Dazai's eyes flicker somewhere past him and then back to his face before he carefully puts a hand on Chuuya's back and guides him into another room filled with shelves of canned food and bottles of cooking oil and dim lighting that makes his head ache.

Chuuya's chest topples over and he has to place his hands on his knees to remain on his feet as he tries to get some air into his lung. But his organs only seem to shrink inside him while the rest of the world becomes bigger and bigger. Too big for him.

"Here." Dazai shoves a paper bag in front of his face. "Breathe into this."

Chuuya slaps it away. Then, after another breathless moment, he accepts it, gasping in and out of it with each shuddering breath that he gulps down. His eyes sting. A prickling sensation crawls over his skin, peeling it off inch by inch until he feels like he has been strung inside out, raw and exposed.

It's too much.

All of it is too damn much.

His breathing slowly returns to him but so does the weight of reality.

"Better?" Dazai asks, crouched next to him as he rubs his back.

Chuuya makes a small noise in the back of his throat. “Shirase is alive.”

“Pardon me?”

“Shirase,” Chuuya’s teeth grit. “Is. Alive. He’s standing in my kitchen right now.”

“Oh.” Dazai is silent for a moment, but the thoughts that turn in his head are loud. His hand pauses. “Are you… okay?”

Chuuya’s head slowly turns to him and he just – his face crumples. “He’s *alive*. One of my best friends is alive.” Warm, salty tears start rolling down his cheeks and dropping to the floor. “But the others aren’t.”

And it’s like after months of denial, of anger, of everything but this, he finally admits it to himself. That the sheep are dead, and that *he* killed them.

Dazai takes one look at him, and pulls him into his arms, hugging him to his chest as one hand comes up to cup the back of his head. Chuuya’s too torn up inside to resist. His chest shakes and aches with the force of the sobs that come from it, and his throat burns, a razor-sharp sting, and Shirase is somehow alive and the others are dead.

Dazai’s shirt is wet but the tears won’t stop coming. It’s like there is a bottomless pool of grief in his body somewhere and now that it has been opened, it will close again; it will keep on spilling and spilling and spilling until there is nothing left of Chuuya anymore but a shell in the shape of the person he once used to be.

Maybe that’s why he clings so hard to Dazai’s shirt. Maybe because clinging to someone else, to him, is the only way to ensure at least a trace of Chuuya remains. Not much, but something.

“Shh, it’s okay,” Dazai murmurs against his hair. “Just let it out.”

He *is.* He is letting all of it out, and it hurts. It hurts more than anything he has ever experienced, dying a tiny thousand deaths again and again.

By the time Chuuya’s tears slow down, he is hollow inside. His head heavy, eyes puffy, but his chest empty, like someone carved the most important things out of him and left a gaping wound.

Dazai's hand strokes his back, up and down, up and down. Chuuya can't find the strength to pull away just yet.

And then the question comes.

"What do you need?"

His throat is so paper-dry that it hurts to swallow. "Clothes," he eventually rasps out. "I said I'm getting clothes."

But he is still half-naked and there are no clothes in the pantry. Just enough provisions to last him for the next three years.

"Then we'll get you some clothes."

Dazai gives his cheek another squeeze and him a reassuring smile before he lets go and slips out of the room. Chuuya's left standing there: his face turned dry and swollen from the emotions that just ransacked him.

Shirase is alive.

One of his best friends that he thought he killed is alive.

Why the fuck is he crying about it?

He should be celebrating, screaming with joy to the skies for giving him this one small miracle but instead –

Instead, even the thought of going back out there and facing Shirase fills him with so much crippling shame and guilt that it paralyzes him from head to toe.

Shirase is somehow alive. But the others aren't.

The door opens. Dazai comes back carrying the clothes that Chuuya left behind in the bathroom during the shower earlier, and he now gratefully accepts them back. He lifts his arms and lets Dazai put him inside the plain grey shirt and does the same with the underwear and the sweatpants. Chuuya rubs a tired hand over his face when Dazai's eyes rake over him after picking up the towel from the ground.

"Do you want me to come with you?"

Yes.

Desperately.

“No,” he says with a sigh. He wants that, but he also knows that he can’t. Not with his friends. “This is something I have to deal with on my own.”

“Okay. Find me if you change your mind.”

Chuuya nods, only mustering up the barest of small smiles in reply.

“But find me afterward anyway,” Dazai adds and pokes his chest. “I’m very interested in hearing how Shirase is currently standing in your kitchen. Guy’s worse than a cockroach.”

A brittle laugh slips out of Chuuya. Maybe it’s the broken, cracked sound of it that makes Dazai step closer and wind his arms around his waist again, pull him into his chest, and keep him there like a locket. Maybe it’s that too which makes Chuuya let out a deep breath and melt against him rather than shying away like he usually would. But like with everything concerning Dazai, touching him always comes with relief.

Inside the space of their bodies pressed together, there is no air for shame or guilt or grief. There is only them, the synchronized staccato of their hearts, and the grounding weight of Dazai’s palms cupping the back of his head, the shape of his mouth when it presses to his forehead.

Afterward, Chuuya feels slightly more composed. Slightly. His nerves still pull at his skin like ravenous ants, but the knowledge of being able to shed it all away later when he will come home to Dazai is enough to take step after step until he is back in the kitchen and the words that Yuan and Shirase have been murmuring to each other come to a thick halt.

“I’m back,” he announces as if that isn’t already obvious.

Yuan’s eyes flicker past him, searching for someone to follow him. When no one does, they land on Chuuya like a punch.

It’s Shirase who breaks the silence.

“Food’s going to be here in a few.” He nods. “So do you want to wait until then or do you want to hear everything now?”

Gulping down a dry breath, Chuuya leans against the counter and meets his gaze. “Tell me everything.”

And so Shirase does.

He tells Chuuya about the way he herded the sheep into the stairwell, away from the teleportation ability user and away from the danger — or so they thought. About the panic that struck when the building suddenly started shaking, then crumbling down around them. How it felt to be trapped in that gigantic, towering casket.

He tells Chuuya how he found one window that was still intact, and how he wanted to get everyone out but that it was simply too dark to see and there were too many bodies – too many *body parts* that belonged to his friends. It was either getting out or dying with them and what was Shirase if not a survivor at heart? So he grabbed the only people he could reach that moment, Rin, Misao, and Akira, and they got out.

They got out, and they saw the soulless monster that was causing all that destruction on top of the building, and they ran because that wasn't Chuuya anymore and all of their friends were most likely already dead.

And he talks about carrying Akira on his back and the pitiful groans that he made, and what it felt like when they paused to catch their breaths and ended up watching Akira take his last one. What it felt like to bury him.

It must be his way of punishing him, Chuuya thinks. The excruciating level of details. And yet there is something cathartic about hearing him describe that day too. Sometimes not knowing is worse.

The doorbell rings at the same time as Shirase finishes speaking. Yuan wordlessly volunteers, disappearing around the corner and leaving the two of them to marinate in the clotted silence.

Chuuya's mouth leaks with words but he waits for Yuan to return. The things he has to say are for her too. It's the least that she deserves from him.

She comes back, a bag with take-out containers dangling between her fingers, and just for one brief heartbeat, Chuuya's lips tug into an amused smile.

"What's so funny?" she asks not only out of curiosity.

"Nothing," he shakes his head, "It's just… you guys could have ordered anything you want. Steaks. Caviar. Lobsters. Anything. And

you still let them bring you cheap take-out. I just thought it was funny."

"Once a street rat, always a street rat," Shirase mutters, already tearing open the bag. "Living in a fancy penthouse and wearing fancy clothes doesn't change that."

"Cheap take-out is much better anyway," Yuan adds with a shrug.

"Portions are bigger too," Chuuya agrees and lets his smile linger for another moment before wiping it away, replacing it with the guilty look of someone who has the blood of all their friends and innocence on his hands.

"I'm sorry." His eyes slide to Yuan. "I'm sorry for running away. I'm sorry for abandoning you." Then they flicker to Shirase. "I'm sorry for killing all our friends. It's not going to bring anyone back, I know that, but… I am. I really am."

He is so sorry that he could stand here and apologize for the next thirty years and it still wouldn't make up for what he's done.

That's how deep his sorrow runs.

How heavy the weight of his sins is.

Yuan and Shirase share a tentative glance before glancing back at him. Chuuya wants to squirm under their attention but forces himself to stare back.

"What happened?" Shirase asks. "That thing… what exactly is that?"

Chuuya's eyelids twitch, startled by the composed tone of his voice and the honesty of his questions. He expected to be met with a *fuck you*, or maybe a punch. But he tries to take it in stride, shifting from one foot to another as he pieces the words that are swirling around in his head into something coherent. "It's a long story too." He raises his gaze to both of them. "Do you remember those attacks that I had as a kid? When I asked you guys to lock me away?"

Shirase nods. Yuan does nothing except gaze at him with hard, still eyes.

"And remember how you found me? No identity, no memories, no knowledge about the world?"

“It was because of the –” Shirase’s confused frown makes him pause. “It was the Suribachi explosion we thought… but that wasn’t the cause, was it?” His eyes narrow. “*You* were the Suribachi explosion.”

Chuuya replies with an empty half-smile. “The one and only.” After another hesitant glance in Yuan’s direction, he carries on. “Long story short, I was… was a lab experiment. Well, the thing in me was –”

“Your ability?” Shirase asks.

“No, my ability’s just my ability.” Chuuya listlessly lets the napkin on the counter hover in the air. “I have full control over it. The *thing* is a singularity. Much more powerful than an ability. Also much harder to control. Those people at the research facility were trying to create a singularity that they could control, and the result was a human vessel that could hold that singularity.” He pauses. “Me. I… I never knew what it was exactly, not until a week ago when I met the people who released me back then and told me the entire story. So that thing… that thing that destroyed the building and created Suribachi city and made those black holes, that’s the singularity. I can’t control it. I can only turn it on. After that, it’s like a natural calamity; it does what it wants.”

“So let me see if I got that,” Shirase says. “You basically carry a nuclear bomb inside you at all times?”

“Something like that, yeah.”

“That sucks, dude.”

Chuuya’s lips purse. “Yeah.” He casts his glance towards Yuan then who looks lost in thought. Did she even listen to him? He wouldn’t blame her if she didn’t.

“Why did you turn it on that day?” Shirase’s next question is.

“It wasn’t… I didn’t do it intentionally.” Chuuya scrubs a hand over his face. “I didn’t know what that thing inside me was. I knew there was something, but never what it could do. And Luca killed Karma and I… I got so angry, I just let it take over.”

He didn’t know.

What a *cowardly* thing to say. And yet it’s the truth.

He didn’t know it would end up wiping out an entire block and most

of the sheep. He should have, but he didn't, and now he has to live with it for the rest of his life.

"So it was the boss who made you do all that?"

Chuuya's eyes snap to Shirase. *"No.* Dazai's the one who turned off that thing and stopped it from wrecking even more havoc."

Shirase leans forward and whispers, "Isn't that very convenient?"

"He was in the same lab," he confesses, the words bursting out of him. "They experimented on his ability *so* he could nullify the singularity. It is convenient because it's not a coincidence."

This time, even Yuan's eyes widen. She blinks several times before asking, "Wait, that's what all this has been all about then?!"

"What do you mean *all this?"* Shirase wants to know.

"You know." She gestures vaguely at Chuuya. "That weird vibe between him and the boss. The arranged marriage. Treating Chuuya like he shits gold and all that?"

"Oh, that," Shirase mutters.

Chuuya keeps his exasperation at bay with a sighed-out, "yeah."

It wasn't just about that. Dazai told him as much in France.

But he doesn't have the energy to delve into that topic right now — or ever, if he is being honest. It's buried somewhere inside him with all his sins, and he doesn't want to add dirt to the blood under his nails.

"Huh," Yuan huffs out and casts her eyes away again. "Didn't expect that."

"Are you sure though?" Shirase still persists. "Like 100% sure that he isn't playing you?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die," Chuuya mutters with a skeptical frown. "Dazai had nothing to do with it. Why are you so hung up on it?"

Shirase rubs his elbow and clears his throat before straightening his spine. "Well, the streets have a lot to say. You know, about your Dazai."

“Like what?”

“Like that he’s been pulling the strings of the Bishop’s Staff the entire time. That he’s playing both sides.”

Chuuya jerks upright. So the word got out? Pianoman was supposed to make sure no one even would even hear a *peep* of that baseless accusation, but –

But if the Armed Detective Agency talked…

Then Pianoman’s efforts might as well have been for the birds.

“Where exactly did you hear that?”

“The streets, dude. I told ya.”

“But who exactly?”

Yuan elbows Shirase and levels a flat stare at Chuuya. “There’s something else.”

He waits for her to go on.

“The Osaka mafia’s coming. A whole bunch of them.”

Chapter End Notes

> Hope you guys enjoyed this chapter! Thank you sooo much for 4000+ kudos btw, it's just insane??? That's so many people :'") I appreciate all of you so, so much, and I'm just glad that I get to share this fic with you guys!
>
> Next up we have:
> - a call for corruption
> - ghosts from the past
> - and a betrayal

Chapter 36: Scapegoats and Cat's-Paws

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Two hours later, Yokohama's harbor is up in flames.

Kouyou, and thus the rest of the Port Mafia's combative units, had been alerted to the upcoming invasion hours before Chuuya ever got word of it, but it doesn't derail him from joining the battle anyway. Yuan and Shirase don't raise any protests either, so the minute the words "the Osaka mafia's coming" fall, they all know what to do. These are the people that Kage allied himself with after the sheep had chased him out of Yokohama. The people who caught and sold human beings like cattle. This is personal.

And it turns out to be necessary too.

The Port Mafia might have an overwhelming advantage in numbers, but the clan from Osaka has technology. Whether because of their alliance with the Bishop's Staff or their own doing, the tactile armor that the members wear lets the sea of bullets that the Port Mafia fires at them bounce off like damn gummy balls. Unfortunate, yes, but there is only so much technology can do in the face of *abilities.* It doesn't take the Port Mafia long to gain the upper hand. Except that the minute it seems like the battle is turning in their favor, something strange happens.

"I don't understand," Yuan's voice says over the line. "Why won't they go down?"

She's right. Something is wrong. Their armor can only do so much, and Chuuya just saw one of the soldiers get shot in the *face* and… walk it off like it was nothing.

Shirase curses under his breath. "Some kind of ability?"

Chuuya's about to weigh in when he freezes. There, just a few feet away from him, the man *flickers.* It's so fleeting that he would assume that the light has played a trick on him except that the gasps of his friends confirm the opposite.

"Did he just —?"

“No way. There’s just… it’s an ability, right? It has to be an ability!”

“I don’t know,” Chuuya mutters, eyes glued to the scene. “Would it be really so crazy if ghosts were real?”

“Yes!” Shirase screeches in his ear, loud enough to make him wince. “Ghosts do not exist!”

“I think it’s an ability — oh my god, holy shit, it happened again!”

“What? Where?!”

“A-another one! Another one just started flickering! We’re being attacked by ghosts!”

The existence of ghosts does not faze Chuuya considering he has something far more wretched living inside him. It does pose a problem though.

“How do you kill someone that’s already dead?” he asks.

“With fire!” Yuan and Shirase exclaim at the same time.

And then:

“But not with gunfire! Real fire!”

“Of course he knows that! You realize that bullets aren’t made of fire, right?!”

“I’m just saying! Why do you always have to be on my ass about everything, huh?”

Ignoring the bickering voices of his friends, Chuuya turns around to his unit, scanning their weaponry for –

“Looking for this?” Grinning, Shiraki presents him with a grenade and a smirk.

“You read my mind, kid,” Chuuya huffs. He doesn’t waste any time after he grabs and lights it up, catapulting it straight toward the group of ghosts with deadly precision. “Down,” he barks out, and they all crouch into position before, a few feet away, the grenade explodes.

The earth beneath his feet trembles. Chuuya glances around, making sure everyone’s safe, then steals a look over the container and –

“Shit.”

“Nothing?!” Shirase yells.

“What now?”

“I think we have to burn their bodies! Isn’t that how it works?”

“Those are their bodies!”

“No, their real bodies!”

“How are we supposed to do that, huh?! They’re from Osaka! For all we know, that’s where they – where they *died* before they became *that!”*

“Chuuya, what now?! We can’t hide forever!”

No, they can’t.

They can’t kill the ghosts, nor do they have the time to find their actual corpses – if that’s how it works.

There is one thing, however, that will get rid of anything, living or dead.

“You have to go,” he tells his friends. “Retreat. Take anyone you see and run as far away as possible.” Even amidst the chaos, the silence that follows his order punctures the air. Chuuya whirls around to his subordinates. *“Now.”*

Eyes lowered to the ground, they nod and quickly start gathering their things to make their retreat.

Chuuya touches his earpiece and takes a breath. “Yuan, Shirase. Did you hear me?”

“Yeah,” Yuan answers. He doesn’t need to ask whether she knows what his plan is. Her voice is thick enough.

Shirase, on the other hand…

“What are you going to do?”

“What I have to,” he murmurs as he gazes at the army of ghosts marching across the port and towards the city. “We can’t kill them, but we can get rid of them. A block hole can.”

“A black… oh.”

Yeah.

“Chuuya.” It’s Yuan. “Are you sure?”

Is he?

No.

He can still taste the ash of the collapsed building in his mouth. The ash of their friends.

He also knows that this is one of those situations where it doesn’t matter whether he is ready or not. He just has to do it.

“I trained for this with Dazai,” he says. “But you have to get now. Can you do that?”

“We’re already retreating,” Yuan replies. And after another pause. “Good luck.”

“See you on the other side,” Shirase tells him.

The line goes silent, but not for long.

“Chuuya.”

“Dazai,” he breathes out. Just hearing his voice alone is enough to quell his spiking nerves. Even if for only a second. “How soon can you get to the docks?”

“Soon,” is the answer. “So corruption, huh?”

Chuuya frowns, though he should really know better by now. “How’d you know?”

“It’s my job. Of course I know.”

That’s good. That means that Dazai’s *soon* is not only a word but a promise, and Dazai’s promises are tighter than steel. Some of them anyway.

“It’s the only choice, right? Or do you see another way to defeat a freaking army of ghosts?”

Dazai chuckles in his ear, forcing Chuuya’s mouth to soften despite the

gravity of the situation he is about to put himself in. Literally. “No, even I didn’t know that ghosts were a thing. Who would have known that the clown was telling the truth back then.”

“Huh?”

“Nikolai Gogol. Remember?”

Chuuya blinks before it comes back to him. Right. There was something. “I thought he was just insane.”

“Pretty sure it’s both.”

“You’re already on your way, right?” he asks, beads of sweat forming on his temple. “You’re not just sitting in your office and spinning in your chair?”

“Chuuya, contrary to your belief, I do have a sliver of professionalism left in me… and I do not want to spend my future on the farm all by myself just because I didn’t get to you in time. I am climbing into a car as we speak.”

Of all the things to think of right now, this idiot is thinking about the farm.

Yet the words have an unmistakably calming effect on him. Chuuya’s pulse stabilizes. In the midst of the storm, he can feel the rush in his ears turn into static noise.

“Good,” he says. “Hurry.”

He places a hand on the boxes in front of him, channeling gravity to catapult himself into the center of the attack when Dazai says, “Chuuya?”

He pauses.

“You’ve got this.”

No question marks.

“I’ve got this,” he repeats in a low murmur before he zeroes in on the enemy and launches himself into the air.

As soon as they see him they aim their weapons at him –

But before they can fire, Chuuya murmurs the phrase that will open

the gates and unleash the beast slumbering in the rotten depths of his soul.

“Oh, grantors of dark disgrace.” His eyes close. *“Do not wake me again.”*

***

His friends are on him as soon as the elevator doors slide open.

“Is he going to be all right?”

“What happened?”

“Did he get hurt?”

“Are the ghosts gone?”

“Chuuya’s going to be okay,” Dazai says, slightly exasperated as he brushes past the two lambs on the way to the living room. Their training must have been useful since Chuuya ‘only’ ended up with a nosebleed and the imminent exhaustion that comes with corruption, but no internal injuries that require a med bay stay – which is why Dazai made the merciful choice to let him come to himself in his apartment. In particular: his couch. “He’ll be knocked out for an hour or two, but other than that, he’ll be fine.”

Only after Chuuya is safely and comfortably resting, does Dazai take the time to take stock of Shirase. Back from the dead. Or is the occurrence of ghosts perhaps at the same time as his grand return not a coincidence? Much to think about.

Shirase meets his gaze straight on. His eyes have hardened in the time since Dazai last saw him, a new, sharper edge to them. Not nearly sharp enough but apparently enough to survive a collapsing building, an escape, and the eyes of the mafia. “What happened out there?”

“The ghosts are gone,” Dazai says with a shrug as he heads to the kitchen to get himself something to drink. There is always so much dreadful dust in the air after corruption. Terrible. “I believe the Osaka clan will not misunderstand this particular message.”

“How come ghosts are a thing in the first place?” Yuan muses somewhere on the other side of the kitchen island. “Did you know about this?”

“Nope.”

“What if there are more? We can’t rely on Chuuya to deal with them every time.”

“I already have people working on a solution.”

“Okay.” And then in a low murmur, she whispers – most likely to Shirase: “It’s still creeping me out. What’s next? Zombies? *Vampires?”*

“I friggin’ know, right?”

“I don’t know about that, but I’ve heard about the existence of werewolves once,” Dazai says, switching on the water kettle. He turns, but the low whistling sound of it is the only thing that penetrates the ripe silence that follows his unfortunate slip-up. It’s something he would tell *Chuuya*, not his friends.

Yuan and Shirase stare at him like they are thinking the exact same thing.

Dazai stares harder because he refuses to feel shamed by them.

“That’s…” Yuan eventually says, “… crazy.”

Dazai’s eyes narrow.

Shirase’s crossed arms flex.

The kettle announces that it’s done with a hiss.

Dazai makes himself a cup of tea as the lambs return to murmuring to each other behind his back. Then he pauses, considering, and grabs two more cups. He might as well use this opportunity to do some digging. And perhaps some pushing.

He lets the lambs know of his generosity by setting the tablets with the tea on the counter with a bit of force, enough to make noise but not enough to spill more hot water than necessary. That is, however, the only kind gesture he spares before grabbing his cup and proceeding to the couch where he takes a seat next to Chuuya, still unconscious.

He feels their gazes follow him without having to lift his eyes.

“Don’t… don’t you have things to do?” Yuan asks.

“Hmm, no.” He takes a slurp of his tea and pats Chuuya’s hair. “Not until this one wakes up.”

A considerable moment passes before the lambs help themselves to the tea and make their way over, albeit hesitantly and unhappily. Clearly, they are worried about Chuuya, Dazai notes as he lets himself examine them, or they would have bothered to take a shower and wash the dirt and grime off their faces. That, at least, is something he understands.

“So Shirase-kun,” he then says, gaze swinging to zero in on the lamb. “I hear you have quite the tale to tell, hm?”

Shirase’s fingers grip the cup hard enough to make his knuckles turn white. “I guess. Yeah.”

Dazai looks at him expectantly.

Shirase’s eyes narrow into a hostile glare.

Yuan stares into her cup and clears her throat, but doesn’t take sides. How brave.

Yawning, Dazai leans back against the couch, bracing one arm over it. He might not actually have all the time in the world, but he does have a thread of patience that has been sharpened and polished into a weapon that no one else here can match. Unless Shirase has miraculously attained some actual useful talents during his absence.

He hasn’t.

“I don’t have anything to say to you.”

Dazai tilts his head and fakes a curious expression.

“I’m only here because of my friends,” Shirase adds, jerking his chin towards Chuuya, then Yuan. “But I’ll *never* work for the mafia.”

Dazai conjures up a soft smile. “Who says the mafia would ever have you?” Before Shirase can vocalize his offended scowl, Dazai elaborates. “You do owe us information, though, considering you’re responsible for the Osaka clan’s presence in Yokohama.”

“I didn’t –” Shirase cuts himself off and spits out a few curses under his breath before leveling a glower at Dazai. “Whether I talked or not, they would have found out the same from De Luca anyway.”

“But you are here and De Luca is dead,” Dazai points out. “So are you going to grow up and finally take accountability for your actions or

are you going to continue to play dumb?"

"I'm not… screw you! I never would have gotten in that situation if *you* hadn't put us there in the first place." Rising to his feet, Shirase points a finger at him. "The split in the sheep. De Luca going crazy. Those religious bastards. Our friends *dying* –" He shakes his head. "All of that happened because of *you.* How about you take some accountability, huh?"

Amused, Dazai takes a long, sweet sip of his tea, all while holding Shirase's gaze. He slurps. Loudly. So loudly –

"You can't be –"

"Sit down!" Yuan snaps and yanks Shirase back onto the couch with a hand in his jacket before he can lunge at Dazai. She shoots him a scalding look. "Have you lost your mind?!"

"Have you?" he mutters back. "Since when do we trust that guy?!"

"All he's doing is asking you for useful intel. It's not unreasonable!"

"Intel," Shirase spits and turns back to glaring daggers at Dazai. "Don't you have eyes everywhere anyway? What do you need me for?"

"You spent time with the Bishop's Staff. I don't think it's necessary to remind you that we didn't get to ask anyone else about their time there."

Shirase's eyes darken, but he, for once, doesn't resort to childish accusations. "You don't."

Dazai's gaze flickers to Chuuya to reassure himself that he is still sleeping and not hearing any of this before he continues his amateur interrogation. "So. Talk."

After another amusing minute of glaring Dazai down, Shirase puffs out a breath and crosses his arms. "Fine. What do you want to know?"

"Everything. From the moment you left this building to the moment you got into that helicopter with Chuuya."

"De Luca led us to a 'safe location' – a place that was protected from the eyes of the mafia." He pointedly jerks his chin at Dazai. "A few minutes in, someone from the Bishop's Staff came to welcome us. Some woman dressed in gray robes. She told us how we're safe now,

yadda yadda yadda, and then she said they have to take De Luca with them for a while so he could give them information about you in exchange. We thought that was about it, but we didn't realize that it wasn't just a matter of exchange until one of us tried to go outside to check out our old territory and their people were surrounding the whole house, guns and all, telling us we couldn't leave until they were done with De Luca."

"How long was De Luca gone?"

"About five days."

"What did you do during that time?"

"Bide our time. We tried to escape a few times, but stopped when they threatened to send our youngest to the same place Luca was being held at."

"They didn't make you work?"

"Not really. But one of their weird ass preachers came by every day and held this long, boring speech about how abilities were the work of the devil."

"So what happened once De Luca came back?"

"They separated us into three groups and gave us jobs."

"And De Luca?"

"I only saw him a few times because we were in different groups, but the few times I did… he was cagey as hell. Definitely not the same person that I remembered. I knew we were in deep shit at that point."

"Your job," Dazai gestures at him. "Tell me about it."

Shirase shifts in his seat, clearly uncomfortable. Yuan looks like she might touch his shoulder or his hand, but after a moment of hesitation, she drops her arm back to her side. "At first, they made me work at a factory. Assembling things. I didn't know what I was assembling back then, but now…" He lifts his hand to his face and motions at one eye. "My guess is on that."

So he has gotten wind of the prosthetic eyes.

Dazai tips his head to the side. "Did you know about them when you boarded the chopper?"

“I told you. No. Or do you think I would have just kept quiet about that?”

“If you have one of those implanted inside you, *yes.*”

“What?! I don’t have any big brother eyes inside of me! That’s gross!”

“That you know of,” Dazai points out, clasping his fingers around his knee. “They could have threatened you into lying about it. The possibilities are endless, really.”

“Well, what the fuck?! How do I make sure that there isn’t some weird camera inside me?!”

“An X-ray, for one. I’ll arrange an appointment for you.”

Dazai has been busy sending his most important people who harbor the most classified information to such appointments as well, but X-Rays are expensive; he has been searching for someone with an X-Ray vision as an ability on the side as well.

“And what happens if I have one? Are you going to kill me?” Shirase demands.

Dazai chuckles. “Then we’ll take it out. You’ll have one less eye, but you’ll be alive. I hear eye patches are coming back into trend anyway.” They are derailing from the topic, though. “You said you only worked at a factory at the beginning. Then what?”

“Right, uh,” Shirase scratches the back of his neck with a frown, “then they gave me another job. Just showed up at our trailer one morning and said I gained a new position. No explanation or information whatsoever. So I came to the address that they gave me, and one of them gave me a brief run-down of what I’m supposed to do. I got a bunch of items, stuff like birth certificates, school reports, medical history, and papers about their abilities, and had to record them in a document.”

A register of ability users.

“Did you ever see any of the people whose information you recorded?”

“Just once,” he murmurs and swallows thickly. “I couldn’t find my superior and my computer wasn’t working. So I wandered around and…” He pauses to glare at his feet. “And I guess I entered the wrong

room because there was someone lying on an operation table… someone who looked exactly like a person I was reading about the day before. I'm pretty sure she was dead. She looked dead."

"So you only ever saw one of them?"

"Yeah, that's what I just said. I didn't exactly get to do much exploring otherwise."

Dazai almost says 'pen and paper' before he remembers that the two little lambs don't exactly behave like the rest of his subordinates do. Instead, he rises to his feet and heads to the round desk that used to serve as the place for Chuuya's study lessons. They haven't had one of those in a while. Ever the teacher's pet though, Chuuya still regularly reads — sometimes when he's brave, he even writes, squinting and cursing the words he murmurs to himself but stubbornly working his way through them anyway.

Dazai is too late to wipe the fond smile off his face that tugs at his lips – so he sharpens it, makes it thin and hollow, as he drops a sheet of paper and a pen on Shirase's lap. "Write down every name, every ability, and every other crumb of information that you remember."

"You greatly overestimate my memory," Shirase tells him, nose high in the air.

"And you greatly overestimate your importance here," Dazai retorts, smiling so sweetly that his teeth start to ache.

But that brat just scoffs. "Wrong. I know you'd kill me like swatting away a fly if it were up to you – but it isn't! You care too much about Chuuya to sabotage that thing you've got going on with him. You can't hurt me. I'm practically untouchable. And we *both* –"

"Both what?" Suddenly someone croaks behind them. Chuuya is rubbing his eyes like he has a headache, trying to push himself up on the couch, and Dazai returns to his side to help him up. "What are you guys yapping about so… aw, fuck… so early in the morning?"

"Try evening," Dazai informs him and brushes a few blood-streaked bangs out of his face. "How are you feeling? Let me get you some water."

"'m fine. How long was I out?"

"Not long. An hour, at best."

“Huh.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Dazai hears Yuan ask as he exploits the fridge for water and greasy leftovers.

“Yeah. ‘s just a headache. Not the end of the world.”

“You look like shit, dude.”

“Shut up, you’re not looking any better. What were you guys arguing about anyway?”

“About your boyfriend trying to boss me around even though I’m not the mafia’s bitch.”

After a pointed beat of silence, Yuan speaks. “Daz – the Boss asked Shirase to write down every piece of information he remembers about his time at the Bishop’s Staff.”

“Why can’t you just be normal?” Chuuya asks this time.

“Hah??!”

“Do you want those people dead or not?”

“Obviously but –"

“Then write it down, for fuck’s sake, or make a voice recording if your hand starts cramping.”

Dazai returns with a cooled bottle of water just in time for Shirase to grumble out his cooperation. “The food is heating up on the stove. It’ll be done in a few minutes.” Chuuya nods before taking several hearty sips. “Are you going to be all right?”

Sometimes corruption’s after-effects can be more… demanding than simple exhaustion, like, for instance, infecting Chuuya with an animalistic desire to climb Dazai like he is his human-sized personal meal and claw at him until he, at least, drags several orgasms out of them.

After screwing close the water bottle, Chuuya sniffs and flicks his gaze up to him, knowing. “I wasn’t that long in that state, so I’ll be fine.”

“Okay then,” Dazai says with a hum, interlacing his fingers behind his back. “I have some paperwork to do.”

“I’ll walk you out.” Chuuya surprisingly accepts the hand that Dazai offers him to get up without swatting it away or complaining. He shoots Shirase a pointed stare in passing. “*List.*”

Dazai doesn’t bother looking at the lamb’s face but he can picture the grimace he pulls just as well. Their brief stroll to the corridor is silent. Only when they arrive in front of the door, does Chuuya sniff at his shirt and wrinkle his nose.

“I need a shower. I stink.”

“You need rest.”

“I just had rest.”

Dazai pins Chuuya with a stern look. “No, you passed out from exertion. Now you need to actually sleep.” His eyes narrow. “I’ll post guards in front of your apartment to make sure you don’t go anywhere. Do not test me.”

Chuuya clings to his mask of annoyance for another moment before dropping it, a tired but soft smile replacing it even though it faces the floor. “Whatever,” he murmurs, and slowly drags his eyes back to Dazai, clearing his throat. “Hey, thanks. For getting to me in time.”

“I told you I would.”

“Yeah, well…”

Their eyes meet in the lingering silence. Then Chuuya swallows and moves, but out of all the things to expect, Dazai does not anticipate the two arms that wind around his neck as Chuuya hugs him. Usually, it’s the other way around – Chuuya acts like he is allergic to anything other than roughhousing while Dazai begs for whatever scrap of physical affection he can get out of him. There is always a first for everything though.

Once he recovers from the shock, it’s easy to relax into the embrace, snake his own arms around Chuuya’s waist to pull him close and keep him there. He claimed that he smelled just now, but Dazai is oddly fond of the scent of gunpowder, blood, and salt, just as long as it comes from Chuuya and not anyone else. Something about it that feels like home.

Even though Chuuya was the one to initiate this, it still takes time for the tension in his spine and in his muscles to melt away. But when it

does, Dazai feels it – and he suspects that it is not only today that seeps out of him but an entire lifetime's worth of it until he all but feels like liquid against Dazai, permeating through the barrier of his body and straight into his soul.

They stay like that, wrapped up in each other until Dazai's pocket starts buzzing stubbornly, and he opens his mouth to make a joke, but Chuuya beats him to it by pulling away and rolling his eyes.

"I don't want to hear it."

"But –"

"Goodbye."

"Are you at least going to come over later, so we try out some real buzzing instead of just this flimsy excuse?"

Chuuya rolls his eyes, but his expression turns more serious when the echo of his friends' muffled voices comes from the living room. "I might be late. I have some catching up to do."

"Good thing I don't stick to a fixed or healthy sleep schedule," Dazai reminds him with a wide grin. And on that note, he spins around, disappearing into the elevator, so Chuuya can't give him any grief about it or say *no*.

***

The next few days are frustratingly slow. The Port Mafia cleans up the docks and despite Dazai's claim that Chuuya's rank is way too high to participate in such grunt work, he helps out — less for altruistic reasons and more to keep himself busy while his blood itches for another fight.

The team that Kouyou and he built to prove Dazai's innocence while being excellent on paper, has failed to deliver the results that they need. Instead, they only found more incriminating and, obviously, false evidence. Looking into the Bishop's Staff technology they also discovered the possibility of triggering every single eye prosthetic bomb at once — a solution that they all decided to dismiss for now as it would result in the simultaneous death of hundreds, or more, people. It would crush the organization, but at what cost? It would make Dazai look even guiltier in front of the world. Chuuya made sure to shut down that path as soon as it was brought up, and even though he doesn't regret that decision, he finds the lack of progress in the war

against those religious freaks demoralizing.

He needs to *do* something. Anything.

So when he gets a call from his unit requesting his presence in a warehouse near the docks, he doesn't waste his breath asking questions. The last person he expects to find there is Kouyou, yet there she is, an outstanding flash of color in contrast to their metallic gray surroundings – even the parasol that's leaning over her shoulder.

"Kouyou-san," Chuuya greets, scanning the empty warehouse with wary eyes as he walks up to her. "What is this?"

"Something that has been long overdue." A vague answer, and a vague smile to go with it. "But before I tell you what I called you here for, I need your word that you will be discreet."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that this is a conversation just between the two of us. For now."

"You don't want Dazai to know about this?"

Kouyou holds his stare without denying or confirming his guess. That is an answer in and of itself.

"I can't promise you that," he says, shaking his head. "Not before I know what this is about. Dazai's the –"

"This is *for* Dazai."

"What is?"

Apparently, she deems him trustworthy after all since she signals him to follow her. "Dazai's time as the boss has been promising so far but his luck is starting to run out. This war that we are fighting – he could have ended it several weeks ago already if he had dealt with it correctly, but he didn't. He is leading us in circles. His enemies are closing in on him." Her gaze cuts to Chuuya, pinning him with a hypnotic stare. "Not only outside of the organization. He is losing ground, Chuuya-kun, and he is losing ground fast."

Chuuya has heard whispers here and there; he's not deaf to their current circumstances, but he is pretty sure Kouyou is being a little dramatic. Sure, the Port Mafia has been admittedly slow to retaliate

against the Bishop's Staff so far, but there is a reason for that – one that Chuuya does not know of but one that surely exists. It's Dazai they are talking about. An expert in the art of playing the long game.

He stops their stroll short to give the executive a flat stare. "Kouyou-san. What exactly did you order me here for?"

Because it sure as hell is not to give him a report that any over-zealous grunt could have given him as well.

"Very well then," Kouyou replies, standing tall and straight before him. "Someone in the higher ranks has come across sensitive information regarding the boss and a member of the Armed Detective Agency."

Chuuya keeps his stare hard, though his heart begins to race inside his chest, filling his body with quivering energy.

"Apparently, Oda Sakunosuke has been secretly taking care of eight orphans that he picked up during the Dragon Head conflict. Children of former mafia members. All in secrecy, of course, to keep any enemies from knowing. " She pauses – and Chuuya's pulse does too. "The boss has been aware of this the entire time."

"That it?" Chuuya asks dumbly. "So the guy runs a secret orphanage. What's it to us?" *To Dazai?*

Kouyou's eyes are a scrutinizing weight on him. "Think like a mafioso, lad. Not like a sheep."

Chuuya bristles at the remark but doesn't waste time on it. It takes him a few seconds to come to a hesitant conclusion. "The kids are mafia property." The word dissolves like acid on his tongue. Referring to human beings, children no less, as property is not something he enjoys doing, but that is what Kouyou is implying here. "A thing like that –" And finally, realization dawns on him. "That's blackmail fodder… that we could have used against Dostoevsky."

Pleased, Kouyou nods, though it doesn't last for long, the dark shadow of concern overshadowing the flash of approval.

"It's something the boss should have taken care of the moment he found out, but at the very least when the detective in question showed up at our doorstep and accused Dazai of being the Bishop's Staff's secret ringleader. You don't sit on information like that in times like these."

“So Dazai has other plans,” Chuuya says. And when Kouyou’s brows rise ever so slightly: “He must have! He’s not an idiot.”

“Maybe so, but surely you’re not so blind to not having noticed Dazai’s abnormal behavior when it comes to the Agency. Have you forgotten what happened the last time they showed up here?”

“They caught him by surprise,” Chuuya argues, aware of how defensive he sounds.

“The boss does not get caught by surprise.”

“He might not act like it but he’s as human as the rest of us,” Chuuya mutters. “He’s not undefeatable. Acting like he is, is irrational.”

“Whatever the case may be,” Kouyou says, raising her chin, “Dazai’s decisions regarding the Agency don’t make any strategic sense, and people are starting to notice. What do you think will happen when word gets out that Dazai could have gotten the Agency under his control months — years ago?”

“I know optics matters, but Dazai’s word should matter more. He’s taken the Port Mafia to heights they couldn’t even dream of before him, and now you’re saying they will turn their back on him just because they’re *impatient?* He is a smart man. He has a plan. Always.”

“Not right now. His current choices aren’t smart.”

“He’s your boss,” Chuuya points out with a hiss.

“Precisely,” Kouyou retorts like she has been waiting for this reminder, “which is why I’m trying to prevent something unfortunate from happening to him.” Then she steps around him; Chuuya’s neck prickles, having her out of sight like that, especially when he feels her lean closer, her breath washing over his ear. “And you should too, but you are too close to him to see what is happening. Think like his shield, Chuuya-kun. Not his *pet.”*

Sizzling anger flushes through Chuuya’s veins and down into his hands, molding them into fists, but Kouyou is already out of reach before he can even think of lashing out; the eyes of a hissing snake stare down at him.

“You can turn your head and pretend like nothing is happening, or you can become proactive and do something with the situation you’ve been handed. Show the Port Mafia that the boss does not hesitate to

make tough calls. Show the city that the Port Mafia does not let anyone trample all over us. Show *Dazai* that despite the collar around your neck, you can do more than just obey his commands."

"You're asking me to go behind Dazai's back," he hisses. "That's treason."

"Against whom?"

"You know whom."

"Don't mistake the boss for the Port Mafia, lad. Every man at the top is replaceable. The organization is not."

"I still swore my loyalty to *him.* We all did."

"That is why we have to protect him from making this mistake. Let me put it differently, Chuuya-kun: either you act or someone else will, but there is only one way that Dazai comes out on top, and it is the way that I am handing you right now."

Chuuya aggressively runs a hand through his hair before blowing out a sharp breath. "Why does it have to be me? You're more than capable of running such an operation on your own. The Port Mafia trusts you. More than they trust me."

"I'm not the one who is glued to the boss' side," she points out matter-of-factly. "Such a call from me could make the boss look even weaker whereas coming from you, it will look like an order from above." Right, of course, because to the Port Mafia, Chuuya is Dazai's pet on a leash. "Not to mention that dealing with the consequences will be much simpler too." Her smile bleeds irony. "The Agency is not the only thing that the boss has been irrational about."

Chuuya's stomach churns.

He doesn't like that look in her eyes – poison that smells like roses but tastes like their thorns. He doesn't like anything about this. Right now, Chuuya is nothing but a pawn on the game board — and so are his feelings for Dazai.

But he would be blind not to see what would happen if he denied Kouyou's one-of-a-kind offer: she would hand it to someone else. Someone who does not have the best of Dazai's interests at heart.

The thing about Kouyou is not that she is disloyal. It's the opposite.

She has devoted her lifeblood to the cause, the organization. Not the man driving it forward. Sometimes these two things don't align, and when that happens, Kouyou will not hesitate to do whatever is necessary to help the Port Mafia move forward. She would cut off Dazai if she considered him a threat.

It hasn't come that far… yet.

But a *no* from Chuuya might just be enough to tip the scale against Dazai's favor, and that…

That can't happen.

Disobeying Dazai's orders, even if implicit, goes against every single one of Chuuya's instincts that have grown inside him ever since he went down on one knee and pressed his loyalty and his life into Dazai's awaiting hands. Meeting Kouyou's challenging stare fills his mouth with bile but Chuuya pushes it down, down, down into the place that has no light, and makes a choice.

"What do you suggest we do?"

Kouyou smiles a close-lipped smile – a stamp of approval on a deal with the devil. It fades into professionalism as quickly as winter sunlight; she is careful not to let the predator shine through. This is supposed to be for the sake of the mafia, not self-interest, after all. "I have the location of the children, and a team on standby, awaiting your orders."

Chuuya accepts the radio and the earpiece she hands him with a tight expression. "This is an extraction only," he tells her. "Not an attack or, god forbid, a massacre. Your team better know that, or I'm not doing this."

"*Your* team."

"My team, of course," he echoes, only able to scoff dryly at this point.

"I have a safe house for the hostages already prepared as well. Everything is ready."

Chuuya slides her a sidelong glance. "Dazai will not let this go unpunished."

"That may be so, but he will still be in the position to punish me at all. That means I will have done my job, and so will have you,

Chuuya-kun.”

***

The same evening, Chuuya is kicking off his boots in the hallway of his suite. He has been spending more time here again rather than holing up in the office on the floor above, but it’s still strange not to head straight to Dazai. That isn’t an option right now though.

The extraction went well. Quietly. No victims. No deaths. Chuuya even spared the life of the older man that runs the restaurant where Oda Sakunosuke has been hiding his orphans – his head will spin and ache for the next few days but that is still a mercy that others usually do not get from the Port Mafia. Now the children are all safely hidden and taken care of inside a secret safe house. The detective must have taught them well because they made quite a fuss when Chuuya showed up with his team, kicking and screaming. But in a fight between a bunch of underaged brats and the Port Mafia, there is only one winner.

They will get used to it.

Chuuya’s sure it won’t take long for the Port Mafia – for Dazai to barter something good out of the Agency in exchange for them.

They will be home in their shitty beds before they even know it.

The darkness that lurks in the empty apartment when Chuuya passes the kitchen is at once comforting and relieving. He wouldn’t want to stand under bright, probing lights right now. Not until Kouyou is finished with her little power display.

His footsteps are the only thing disturbing the silence, so Yuan and Shirase must be out somewhere. Probably with the other Sheep. Chuuya couldn’t bring himself to meet them when Shirase suggested that. Maybe that’s why Yuan’s gone. He could feel her disapproval like the glaring sunlight during a heat weave.

He steps inside his bedroom, in desperate need of a shower when the sudden flicker of lamp-light makes him jump in his steps.

“Holy fuck,” he gasps, clutching his heaving chest. “What the hell, Dazai?”

Dazai, lounging in the armchair in the corner of the room – usually reserved for Kafka, leans forward and plants his elbows on his knees;

half of his face draped in swirling shadows. “Had a nice day at work, dear?”

Chapter End Notes

I've lived through 10 lives and deaths last month but I'll spare y'all the details and just say: thank you all for your patience and happy new year! We have several juicy chapters coming up!

The next one will have:
- a confrontation
- a punishment
- and two conversations with two very different people

Btw, check out these amazing paintings here and here in the meanwhile!!!

Chapter 37: God Complex

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He steps inside the bedroom, in desperate need of a shower when the sudden flicker of a lamp-light makes him jump in his steps.

“Holy fuck,” he gasps, clutching his heaving chest. “What the hell, Dazai?”

Dazai, lounging in the armchair in the corner of the room, leans forward and plants his elbows on his knees. Half of his face draped in shadows. “Had a nice day at work, dear?”

He knows, is the first thought that crosses Chuuya’s mind.

The second is the command to get his act together. This is Dazai. Just Dazai.

“I was going to hop in the shower, then come see you,” he says, loosening the collar of his shirt with impatient, hasty movements. “I know what you’re going to say but –”

“Is that a new trend? You knowing what I’m going to do?”

“— I had a good reason for doing what I did,” Chuuya continues, ignoring the snide remark. “It was either that or risking Kouyou going against you.”

On the other side of the room, Dazai gazes blankly at him.

Chuuya takes a breath and tries again. “I figured you had a plan to use the orphans against the Agency *eventually*, but the Colonel found out about it. You know as well as I do what would have happened if we hadn’t done anything about it.” He gestures at Dazai. “So just move your plans ahead of your timeline.”

There.

Easy.

“And what plan, say, is that supposed to be? Mine or whatever half-assed idea you’ve impulsively decided to put into action?”

Chuuya clicks his tongue. “I told you –”

“I heard you, loud and clear,” Dazai cuts in, his voice so dry it tears at Chuuya’s composure. “I simply don’t really care about what seemed like the best choice at that moment. What I care about is that there was a reason I never acted on that information, and knowing that, you *ignored* it. You went behind my back.”

“To help you,” Chuuya points out because Dazai chose to conveniently leave that part out. “I did it so your people wouldn’t turn against you.”

“No, you did it because you don’t *think.”*

He inhales sharply, nostrils flaring.

Dazai notices it, his one eye growing cold and endless as it zeroes in on him. “You just don’t think, Chuuya. You act, and that might have been enough until now but you can’t rely on your instincts alone for the rest of your life. You say you want three years on top? Then start *thinking* because I’m not going to be able to do it for you all the time.”

“What should I have thought then, huh?” Chuuya stalks forward to glare at him better. “You have valuable blackmail material that we could have used weeks ago, but instead you had a meltdown! Now someone found out, and if I hadn’t done something about it, somebody else would have! So go ahead, enlighten me. What was I supposed to think when you were the one to fuck this up!?”

“You should have seen past Kouyou’s cheap manipulation tactics,” Dazai says. “At the very least, I expected that much of you.”

“Don’t do that. Don’t talk to me like I’m some fucking imbecile that can’t tell apart left from right.”

“Then don’t act like one. Kouyou is a political animal, Chuuya. She *used* you.”

“No, fuck you,” Chuuya hisses. He refuses to just stand here and accept the verbal beating Dazai has decided to punish him with. “You don’t get to act all holier than thou all of a sudden when you’re no better than Kouyou! And by the way, making that choice would have been a whole lot easier if you actually bothered to tell me about your stupid plans every once in a while, but you don’t, so don’t blame me for the mess that *you* created!”

“Tell me this.” Dazai’s gaze lifts, yet it still feels like he is looking down at him. “What happened when I told you to stay out of the Sheep’s rescue mission?” Chuuya’s blood runs cold, freezing him in place. “Did you or did you not ignore my advice without considering it for even a single second?”

“Don’t,” he warns. A ragged whisper.

“Did you or did you not do whatever the hell you wanted only to end up regretting it later?”

“Shut up.”

Dazai tips his head to the side, feigning innocence. “That’s what you told me back then too. And look how that turned out.”

It’s a fragment of truth that was there the entire time, stuck in Chuuya’s skin like a tiny yet festering splinter. One that he has been ignoring because if he didn’t – if he pulled it out and held it in front of his face and saw it for what it was –

If he had just listened to Dazai –

Everything would have been different.

The Sheep would be alive.

All he had to do was *listen*.

The weight of what he had done would crush him. And, this time, *for the tainted sorrow* wouldn’t help him get up. Not even Dazai or the promise of vengeance would.

And here Dazai is, digging his fingers into Chuuya’s flesh to pull out the splinter and present it to him with a cold, condescending stare. *Look at it,* it says. *Look at what happens to people when you take charge instead of following orders like the good little soldier that you are.*

Chuuya’s teeth clench so hard he thinks they might crack when he shakes his head. He is not going to look, or listen, or obey . His skin is not made out of wax. His agony will not burn him down; it will set him alight.

“You made it into a game,” he snarls. “Everything is a game to you. My friends. Your people. This job –” He stabs a finger at him. “*Your* job. Ever since we met, you have been telling me how much you don’t

like it. For fuck's sake, you admitted that all I ever was to you was a future replacement! You said that to my face! So why does it suddenly matter, huh? What is it about the Agency – about that guy that makes you act like an entirely different person every time? What is it, Dazai?"

Dazai gets to his feet, raising his chin and – *and stalling for time* because he doesn't want to give Chuuya an answer. Of course not.

"You have some nerve to act like I'm the stupid one when you can't even answer one simple question." Chuuya huffs in disbelief. "You can't expect people to follow plans that you never disclosed to them. That's not how it works."

"I gave an order," Dazai snaps back unexpectedly. "That should have been enough!"

"Since when?! You've never cared before!"

"What I care about or don't isn't your decision to make. I said not to touch the Agency, not to start another senseless war –"

"They started it when they chose to align themselves with Dostoevsky!"

"He tricked them!"

"That doesn't matter! They're on the wrong side!"

"Who decides that? You?"

Chuuya's nostrils flare. "Everyone. Everyone here *except* you."

"Then you ought to remember that this isn't a democracy." Dazai flashes him a cold-blooded smile. "And I'm still the boss."

"*Right now*, you mean. You are the boss right now because you've suddenly decided to care. Meanwhile, a week ago, you were asking me to run away with you and leave everyone behind like it was nothing."

It's like the words don't even reach him; Dazai doesn't acknowledge hearing them as he tries to brush past Chuuya.

"You said –" He grabs Dazai's wrist, pushing him back again. "— that you would give me three years – three years that *you* didn't want, so where are they?"

Dazai purposefully removes Chuuya's white-knuckled fingers from him before mustering him with a scrutinizing stare that drips with stale disappointment. "You're not ready."

"And you don't have enough time to wait until you deem me ready," Chuuya shoots back. "Your people want blood that you won't give them. You –" The words snag in his throat. "You promised, Dazai. You promised to kill Dostoevsky, and now I'm not even sure you want that."

"This is exactly your problem. You're short-sighted. You refuse to see past what's right in front of you because you're letting your personal affections and grievances guide you." Chuuya's blood slows down to a simmering pace when a hand cups his chin, pushing it up to look into Dazai's eye, seeing that aberrant mixture of disdain and affection – like he really is just looking at his pet that failed to do what his owner asked of him. "You made a mistake today. I'm not going to let you make it twice."

Chuuya stiffens, feeling like his mind is suspended in viscous water when he locks his fingers around Dazai's arm again – except this time he isn't going to be pushed away that easily. "No," he says. "You're the one who made a mistake."

Dazai's eye narrows.

"You took me in, trained me, petted me, and taught me to eat from your hand. But that doesn't make me your pet, Dazai. That just makes me a very loyal beast. So I didn't make a mistake. I did exactly what you have been telling me to do all this time. Use someone's secrets against them to gain an advantage, be it someone's sibling or their orphans. I took that detective's secret and I exploited it so you wouldn't have to, and I would do it again. It's *your* mistake to believe I wouldn't do worse things for you."

"I didn't ask you for that," Dazai whispers.

"You did. You asked me to lock my grief away and fight. For you."

"Not like that."

"Not like *what?"* Chuuya shouts in frantic bewilderment. "Is it the kids? Is it going behind your back? Is – is it that detective? What is it that is so wrong in your eyes?!"

"Everything! Your impatience, your willingness to listen to Kouyou

but not me, your decision-making if you truly believe that stealing a bunch of innocent children will make the Agency bend to you rather than bring their wrath down on you! It was a stupid, thoughtless, and arrogant move and you're *still* too stubborn to see it!" Then he goes ahead and – he shoves Chuuya away like he is the dust on his coat. "And now *I* will have to fix it."

Chuuya's thread of patience burns to a crisp. Snarling, he slams his elbow against Dazai's windpipe, pinning him against the nearest wall, chest throbbing with overwhelming heat. "It's fucking done, Dazai. Use it to your advantage instead of further agonizing your people."

"Let go of me." Dazai's tone is so still Chuuya's neck prickles; his instincts are too damn good, no matter what this bastard says, not to recognize danger when he hears it.

But he will be damned if he lets Dazai do this.

"No, not until you promise to let it go. Let Kouyou deal with the kids and play along like it's been your idea from the very beginning."

"You're too heavy to thread ice this thin."

Chuuya swallows, voice raw. "If drowning means I can save you from doing something very stupid just because you're angry, I'm okay with that. "

"You still don't get it, do you?" Dazai struggles against the hold on him for a heartbeat. "I'm doing this *for* you."

Chuuya pauses. His confusion tricks him into forgetting who he is dealing with. Dazai wrenches Chuuya's arm off him, spins them around and reverses their positions. Chuuya lets him, still slow from surprise. Dazai only considers him for a second before he decides that he's not even worth that though, turning around, perfectly still and straight. Like nothing is wrong.

"What did you mean –" Chuuya starts, but Dazai doesn't wait to hear him out; he has already vanished around the corner before Chuuya can even voice his question. "… you were doing this for me?" he still mumbles to himself.

Lips curling into a bitter smile, he lets his eyes fall shut.

Why even bother asking? It was probably just a tactic to make Chuuya let go of him, and as always, he fell for it.

Stupid, stupid, *stupid.*

But Chuuya doesn't linger in the silence of the bedroom for too long.

The line on the other end of the phone rings a few times before connecting.

"Kouyou-san," Chuuya says, pushing away from the wall, "he knows."

"Does he now," she murmurs, accompanied by the muffled sound of footsteps in the background.

"You better get those kids –"

"Chuuya-kun," she cuts in then, her poised voice pitching startlingly high.

He rocks to a halt, knuckles turning white around the phone that's pressed to his ear. "What?!"

"It's too –"

Static.

Nothing.

Dazai was this fast?

He left less than two minutes ago!

"Damn it," Chuuya curses, and sets off into a run. "Damn it, damn it, *damn it*!"

He forgoes the elevator, having more trust in his ability than in technology. *For the tainted sorrow* catapults him up the flight of stairs, only stopping to punch his ID card against the security sensors – arguably, the longest thirty seconds of his life – before he breaks through the doors, and sees Dazai's retreating figure vanish down the end of the dim hallway.

So familiar that Chuuya knows Dazai will see him coming, no matter how lightning-fast or soundless he makes himself. So familiar that he can use it to his advantage.

His feet kick off the floor before any doubts can creep in. Chuuya moves fast, flying from surface to surface by manipulating his gravity, but the world around him turns into slow motion, making everything

appear crystal clear –

Dazai takes a nonchalant step to the side, avoiding Chuuya's attack like it's a dance instead of a deliberate surprise maneuver

Hah.

Chuuya's gravity decreases until he is nothing more than a speckle of dust floating through the air, ricocheting off the opposite wall and right back into the space that Dazai moves to.

They collide with a thudding noise and fall to the floor in a heap.

Skin touches skin, Chuuya's ability flickers out, but it doesn't slow him down for even a second; he is already wrestling Dazai's arm to his sides.

"You stubborn, reckless brat –"

"Who's the one being reckless?" Chuuya hisses back. "Not me!"

But familiarity is a deception. Dazai shoves him away with a force that Chuuya doesn't expect *and* thinks is possible. "What are you trying to accomplish?" Dazai's on top of him in seconds, his eye black and unforgiving, the fingers pinning both of Chuuya's wrists to one side even colder. "It's already done."

Chuuya shakes his head, nostrils flaring. "Undo it! Let us handle this. For once in your life, Dazai, trust us." They stare at each other and the air around them, in the whole goddamn building, begins to dwindle. "Trust *me."*

"Funny, coming from you," Dazai sneers softly, chest rising and falling.

"I trust you all the time!" Chuuya snarls and kicks out his legs to curl them around Dazai, finding the pressure spots that make his body jerk in pain. Still, the man is stubborn, which is why that earns him an elbow to the cheek.

That gives Chuuya the necessary room to reverse their positions. It also fuels Dazai's temper.

"No, you don't; not when it matters." He dodges every single one of Chuuya's hits with a calm that makes Chuuya's neck prickle. "Give it up, and stop running around like a headless chicken. You know better

than that."

He punches a hole in Dazai's defense a moment later, slamming him against the wall hard enough to make it tremble. "Like you've ever cared…!"

The next thing he knows several hands wrap around him, forcing Chuuya back as an undignified noise slips out of his throat.

Ironically enough, Dazai looks just as offended by the intrusion as Chuuya. "Let go of him," he barks at the bodyguards who must have noticed them brawling in the hallway. "Go. *Leave."*

Chuuya hardly needs his help – one flick of his hand, and the four grown men would sink through the floor in seconds. But it's not their fault. This is between him and Dazai, and no one else.

He watches them mutter confused apologies to Dazai, bow their heads, and hurry away.

"Now." Dazai's punishing gaze falls on him. "What should I do with you?"

Meeting it, Chuuya raises his chin defiantly. "You should let me do my damn job as your bodyguard."

"Cute." Dazai curves his mouth into a horrible mock grin before placing his hand around Chuuya's neck and shoving him forward, toward the office. "But no."

"What are you going to do with Kouyou?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"You damn –"

"No, *you,*" Dazai's flat tone turns into a low hiss. "You listen for once, Chuuya. You disobeyed, you went behind my back, and you let Kouyou manipulate you into betraying me. Now would be the time to shut your little mouth and *listen* rather than trying to fight me in the hallway like a fifteen-year-old punk."

Chuuya snarls under his breath but doesn't bite back until they are in the privacy of Dazai's office. "What did you do to Kouyou?" he asks again. Dazai's men must have found the safe house where the hostages were kept, so that's a bust, but what did they do with Kouyou?

“Nothing,” Dazai says, releasing Chuuya to fold his hands behind his back and continue his pace without him.

“Nothing? I’m supposed to believe that?”

“Nothing *yet*.”

“Can you talk to me for once in your life?!”

His answer is dismissive silence.

“Fine,” Chuuya lifts his chin. “Then I’m not staying here.”

Dazai shoots him a wry look over his shoulder. “You are.”

“The hell I am.”

“My men will make sure of it.”

“Your men are not the obstacle that you think they are.”

“Leave then,” Dazai replies airily, inspecting his nails behind his desk. “But come back and Kouyou will be dead.”

Chuuya’s head jerks back. “You wouldn’t.”

“Wouldn’t I?” Dazai’s eye only lifts to blink at him, feigning confusion. “Kouyou betrayed me. She orchestrated a plot to go behind my back, used you as her ploy, *and* disobeyed direct orders. That sounds a lot like staging a coup to me.”

“She’s been your executive for *years*. The least you can give her is the benefit of the doubt!”

“The benefit of the doubt has no place in the mafia. The first and most important rule is to follow the order of the boss. Me. Kouyou has disrespected not only that but the entire chain of command. She is dangerous.”

Chuuya storms forward to slam his hands against Dazai’s desk. “And I helped her pull it off. Are you going to execute me as well?”

“Don’t be silly,” Dazai remains unfazed by the anger that Chuuya is brimming with. “You were just a puppet.”

“You –!” Chuuya grits his teeth so hard that it makes his head ache. “You would have to be a moronic idiot to do something that stupid.”

Doubts are already growing. Executing Kouyou could tip the scale entirely against his favor.

“You’re lying,” he hisses. “I don’t believe you.”

All Dazai does though is meet his stare head-on. “Go on then. Call my bluff. I dare you.” He smiles. “See what happens if you walk out of this office.”

It goes against every instinct in Chuuya’s body to bow his head and give in. Dazai is lying. He has to be. But –

He has already risked his own position only to protect those detectives. That *one* detective. Who is to say he wouldn’t even go as far as killing his best executive to solidify his point in stone?

Fuck. Chuuya blows out a breath, fighting the urge to lunge over the desk and pummel Dazai until he is blue in the face. *Fucking hell. Damn it.*

Dazai’s gaze gleams with purring satisfaction.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Chuuya demands to know. “I mean it. What is your goal here? Where are you going with this?”

Despite holding his eyes, Dazai doesn’t grant him an answer.

Lips curling, Chuuya turns away from him to glower at the wall. “I’ll stay, and you’re not going to touch Kouyou. That’s the deal, right?”

Again, only silence.

Chuuya growls when he glances over and sees Dazai idly typing away at his phone whilst ignoring him. His feet move before his brain does. A moment later, Dazai’s stupid phone gets crushed between Chuuya’s fingers and the hundred tiny fragments fall to the floor.

Dazai’s lips flatten in silent displeasure. But not even that is enough to thaw his cold shoulder; he opens a desk drawer and promptly helps himself to a new phone.

“No,” Chuuya snaps, lunging for the drawer before Dazai can, and ripping it off its hinges. The touch of their arms makes the impact of Chuuya’s hurl smaller, but only by an insignificant amount. It still lands somewhere several meters away with a violent thump. “I can do this all day long until your office is no longer recognizable,” he snaps,

“or you can stop acting like a fucking child and *talk to me.”*

At last, Dazai’s eye slides to him, acknowledging his presence with a stony but vicious glance. Chuuya should find it concerning how much of his anger stems from being ignored rather than everything else that Dazai is currently endangering, but as it is, he is too busy soaking up the spotlight.

“You want my attention that bad?” Dazai asks and tilts his head. “Then come here.”

Chuuya’s eyes narrow, smelling blood in the air.

Dazai motions him to come closer again with a flick of his hand. Reluctantly, Chuuya does – just to see what will happen.

He does not expect fingers to yank him down by the collar around his neck so that he crash-lands into Dazai – or, his mouth that drags Chuuya into a mean, biting kiss. The low noise that he makes gets swallowed by Dazai. For a moment, Chuuya is frozen into place, not sure whether he likes this or not. His heart slams wildly against his ribcage, so loud it’s the only thing he hears.

Then he growls and pushes Dazai away with a palm on his chest.

Panting, Chuuya stares at him, searching for something genuine but only finding the same game face that Dazai presents to the rest of the world. This is just another tactic. His way of telling Chuuya that he can ruin his office however he wants; it still won’t make Dazai talk to him. Or forgive him.

After another second, Chuuya spins around with a shake of his head and stalks to the couch where he sits down aggressively and stares at nothing just as aggressively.

If Dazai wants to punish him, so be it.

That still won’t stop Chuuya from making sure that Dazai stays right where he is.

He doesn’t know how much time passes, too busy marinating in his simmering frustration, but they don’t speak a word to each other. Chuuya resists breaking the silence when he hears approaching footsteps. He still rises to his feet and, after swallowing a chunk of his pride, positions himself at Dazai’s back to at least present a unified picture. It doesn’t matter that the reality couldn’t be further from the

truth.

It's Kouyou.

Kouyou, four of her girls, and Dazai's men, who shepherd them inside silently. No one is restrained, but it's clear that this is a summoning and not a friendly visit.

Chuuya's eyes flicker to Dazai, who pillows his chin on his folded hands. The image of relaxed patience is a deception, but Kouyou must be aware of that anyway, mirroring his strategic nonchalance as she comes to a halt before the desk.

"Boss," she says and lowers her chin along with her girls. That is all that she says.

Chuuya shifts from one foot to another, uncomfortable. They should be putting their heads together to put an end to the Bishop's Staff once and for all; instead, they are fighting with each other. It's ludicrous.

"Kouyou-san." Dazai gives her an obligatory nod. "Thank you for coming although I wish it wouldn't have been under such circumstances."

"I, too, wish it wouldn't have come to this. But I did what –"

"Chuuya already told me why you did it."

Chuuya's expression twitches. Trying to keep his face neutral, he stares at Dazai from the side, wondering where the hell he is going with this.

Chuuya barely told him anything, least of all regarding Kouyou!

Dazai lets out a theatrical sigh before pushing to his feet and heading straight toward *him*. "Chuuya, Chuuya," he murmurs, lifting his hand to pat Chuuya's cheek in such an overly-condescending manner that it makes his skin prickle. "So passionate, and so full of ideas…" Dazai meets his gaze. "But Chuuya still has so much to learn. Don't you?"

Everything about this is wrong.

Dazai is lying through his teeth despite having threatened to execute Kouyou for her actions just half an hour ago!

But –

As patronizing as this performance is, he is also throwing Chuuya a rope here.

So he makes himself stare back and say, “Yeah.” Dazai’s gaze refuses to lessen, silently pushing him for more — for a better show. Chuuya clears his throat, glancing at Kouyou who watches them, more curious than anything, and back to Dazai. “I thought I was doing you a favor by going after the kids. I wanted to be… proactive.”

“Proactive, huh,” Dazai echoes, fingers digging into Chuuya’s face hard enough to nearly make him wince before they soften and slide down, down, down to his waist and pull at him. Chuuya ends up seated on Dazai’s right thigh, painfully stiff. “Who could be angered by such devotion? Chuuya here just wanted to be a good little soldier and ended up dragging you –” Dazai’s gaze descends on Kouyou “– into his mess. I guess some people are destined to simply follow orders and not give them, hm?” His breath washes over Chuuya’s ear as he speaks, creating an aberrant mixture of humiliation and heat in the base of his stomach. Fucking bastard. “Still, actions have consequences. I can’t let this disobedience go unpunished.”

Kouyou, who has been a silent observer up until now nods. “Of course, boss.”

“Chuuya here –” again, that belittling pat to his cheek “— will personally return the hostages to their caregiver.”

Chuuya’s spine goes rigid with disapproval.

Kouyou does a better job of overriding hers with a professional frown. “Are you sure that is the wisest choice, boss? Chuuya might have acted too hastily, but now that the deed has already been done, we may as well make use of it.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” Dazai says, clipped.

“Boss,” Kouyou says again, “consider the divided and weak picture that this will paint of the Port Mafia.”

“The Agency isn’t our enemy. It doesn’t matter what picture we paint.”

“Yet they are on the *side* of the enemy.”

“Not for long anymore.”

“We have tried –”

“I wasn’t asking for opinions, Kouyou. I was merely generous enough to share my decision with you. Don’t confuse these two things; they are not one and the same.”

Kouyou’s lips press into a thin line.

“Now,” Dazai tightens his clutch around Chuuya’s waist, “I will carry out my punishment for Chuuya in private. As for you, Kouyou-san… I’m afraid I no longer require your services as my personal advisor.”

“Boss –”

Dazai lifts a hand to cut her off. “I need to be able to trust my advisor, and I cannot trust someone who goes along with such half-baked schemes without alerting me to them.”

Chuuya sees her objections rise and fall in her eyes before she accepts that decision with a tight nod.

“And Kouyou dear?” Dazai says. “Next time, it will be your executive title – or worse.” With these words, he dismisses her, watching his men escort her out of his office.

Chuuya waits until they disappear out of his sight before he jumps to his feet – or, he tries to anyway. Dazai snakes both of his arms around his middle and yanks him right back onto his lap.

“In a hurry to get away, are we?”

“Let me go,” Chuuya mutters, shooting him a glare over his shoulder, “before I break your hands.”

Dazai tilts his head. “And what if this is my punishment? Will you accept it?”

“Why didn’t you just tell me you’d act like it was my idea to spare Kouyou?” Chuuya asks instead, ignoring the question. “She probably saw right through me because you, once again, decided to put me in the spotlight without bothering to tell me first.”

“If you can’t fake one single lie, that’s not my problem.”

“It is your problem! It is exactly your problem! You *always* do this!”

“Maybe I’m not inclined to share my secrets with you anymore

either."

"Then why lie? Why protect me? Why not execute both me and Kouyou for betraying you, huh?!"

Dazai gives him a cool look before releasing Chuuya and pushing him to his feet none-too-gently. "I thought you wanted me to believe that you aren't this dumb."

"Right," Chuuya scoffs, aggressively tugging at the waistband of his pants because everything feels too tight and too wrong. "Let me guess. You still want me to take over as boss. Am I correct?"

"As a matter of fact, you are! For once."

"Except that you don't actually want me to make the decisions."

"I want you to make the *right* decisions."

"How am I supposed to do that if you won't fucking tell me anything?"

"Do you think your enemies will always tell you everything that you need to know?" Chuuya's mouth opens, but Dazai beats him to a response. "Besides, I *told* you not to attack the Agency and you went ahead and did it anyway. Who is to say that you wouldn't have done the same with Kouyou?"

Chuuya stabs a finger at him. "Stop acting like everything I ever do is betray you. I made one mistake. *One.* And I still don't think it was a mistake."

"Yes, that's the problem."

"It is! Kouyou was right! You can't just –" he makes a helpless gesture "— show up at the doorstep of the Agency with the kids and be like 'whoops, sorry, me and my executives don't get along at the moment'!"

"If you're so worried about optics, come up with a cover story," Dazai snaps. "But the kids will return to the detective by the end of this day. That's the last time I'm talking about this with you."

It's not the last thing that Chuuya has to say about it, but he can see that every further argument will only push Dazai away more and more, and that is not going to benefit either of them.

Except the moment he turns on his heels, Dazai asks, “Where are you going?”

“Out,” Chuuya growls.

“Your job is here. With me.”

“What, so you can make sure that I won’t betray you again?”

“No, so you fulfill your duty and be the bodyguard that you vowed to be.”

“And what if I want to take a shower? Or a fucking nap?”

Dazai takes a seat behind his desk without even bothering to glance at him. “I have a perfectly functioning bed and shower right here. Make use of them.”

“Well, I don’t *want* to do it here.”

“And *I don’t care,”* Dazai says, matching his stubbornness, “so stop acting like a brat, and look for excuses to *leave*.”

Chuuya’s lips twitch. Is this only about making sure that he stays in line, or is this Dazai’s twisted way of telling him – no, asking him to stay even when they are at each other’s throats?

Don’t get Chuuya wrong. Given the chance, he would throttle the man in an instant but –

But he would do it for him. For Dazai. He would do it *because* he cares about what happens to him. Chuuya made a vow to stand by his side no matter what. That means he will protect Dazai.

He *is* protecting Dazai from an unreasonable judgment.

“I’ll come back.” Chuuya has to force the words out of his mouth and past his pride but he still does it. “When I no longer feel like punching you, I’ll come back.”

Dazai meets his scowl with a blank stare.

Chuuya grits his teeth. “I *will*. Have at least that much trust in me, you fucking asshole.”

At last, Dazai’s expression breaks and he huffs to himself, releasing Chuuya with a flick of his hand. “Don’t kidnap any children while you

are away."

"Fuck you."

It's less loaded than the last *fuck you* Chuuya uttered though, so that's progress.

Right?

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Although Chuuya could use some rest, he finds his apartment, once again, crowded when he closes the door behind him. One of these days he is going to make use of the money in his bank account and rent out a hotel room just for himself. Better yet, buy a small flat that no one knows about.

The mixture of different but familiar noises comes from the kitchen where he finds Yuan, Shirase, and Albatross seated around the bar.

Albatross is the first to notice his arrival, greeting him with a nod. "Look who the cat dragged in. If it isn't Mr. Executive Nakahara himself."

Chuuya replies with a grunt. On the stove sit the leftovers of the dinner they had – seafood, meat and vegetables – still warm and smelling better than the take-out he's been shoving into himself lately.

"What's got you so grumpy?" Shirase asks.

"Nothing," Chuuya mutters, shoveling food onto a plate. "Everything's fine."

"At this point, I'm not even sure you know what that word means," Yuan replies. She is wearing a wry half-smile when he turns around, and it deepens the scowl on his face.

They talk to each other again, but it's not what it used to be. Chuuya gets that. It's just that seeing his friends here, casually having dinner and drinks, makes everything feel so deceptively normal when it's not.

Albatross hums around the bottle of beer in his mouth, rushing to get a word into the conversation. "He'd be pulling a knife out of his guts and still insist everything's fine."

Chuuya rolls his eyes.

“Hey guys,” Shirase is next to join, mimicking his voice. “I’m dead, but don’t worry, I’m still fine!’”

He does a shit job of it. Chuuya does not sound like that at all.

Yuan laughs, slapping the countertop. “Everything is wrong, the world’s dying, and I’m traumatized to hell and back, but look, I’m fine.”

“Ha, ha,” Chuuya deadpans after he sits down, “you’re all very funny.”

Albatross, still chuckling to himself, elbows him. “But no, seriously. What’s wrong? How can we help?”

“Do we need to beat up the boss?” Yuan asks. “Are you guys fighting?”

Uncomfortable, Chuuya ducks his head as he pretends to be preoccupied with the food.

That is a mistake.

Yuan lets out a gasp. “You are fighting! What happened?” Despite her words, there is a sardonic edge to her tone. “You guys looked perfectly happy a few days ago.”

“It’s nothing like that.” Chuuya stabs the fish on his plate with his chopsticks. Even if he wanted to discuss his argument with Dazai – which he doesn’t – he wouldn’t be able to. He doubts that any one of them would go around and talk about it, but Dazai was right about one thing today, and it’s that doubts have no place in the mafia. Better to err on the side of caution.

“Then what is it like?” Albatross asks anyway, happy to ignore Chuuya’s blatant refusal to open up as he slurps around his drink.

Dazai refuses to use a bunch of secret orphans as blackmail material against the Armed Detective Agency and it’s stupid and dangerous and makes him seem weak in front of his people.

The thought makes him cringe. If someone had told the same thing to him a year ago, Chuuya would have punched them and said that you don’t gamble with the lives of kids.

Hell, even a few months ago Chuuya would have said the same thing. He risked his life to help Karma and his friends and now –

Now Karma is dead, and so is the part of Chuuya that wore the semblance of a white hat.

It's not like he wants these kids dead. He doesn't. That was never the plan, to begin with.

He merely thinks it's worth the risk if that means getting a shot at beating Dostoevsky at his own game.

After everything that man has cost them. All of them…

Is that so wrong?

Chuuya shrugs. "We're… having a difference of opinions."

"Ah," Albatross finally catches on. "Classified information, huh?"

"So to speak."

That finally puts an end to the interrogation, and his friends move on to other topics. Shirase still insists he isn't and will never work a single minute for the mafia, but he is fine to hang out with Yuan and Chuuya on the mafia's dime. Yuan has a bit more leeway from Kouyou these days, and when she mentions the rumor that Kouyou has been relieved of her advisor duties, Chuuya keeps his mouth pointedly shut.

Albatross tells them about the latest development regarding the ghosts they encountered at the harbor. According to the Osaka mafiosi they have in captivity, they are not the products of an ability, but an actual phenomenon. Tortured souls that refuse to leave the realm of the living and therefore stay behind as mere ghosts. No one is really inclined to believe that crap.

Tortured souls, really?

It even sounds corny.

What Chuuya doesn't mention is that something like that damn *Book* could make it happen. Dazai's obviously refusing to speak any more of it either, but how else do you explain actual ghosts?

Abilities are one thing, but ghosts are… ghosts.

Eventually, Yuan and Shirase get preoccupied raiding the pantry for booze, and Chuuya uses the moment alone to ask Albatross a question that has been haunting him for a while now.

“What do you know about the Armed Detective Agency?”

Albatross’ brows rise as he finishes his beer with a hiss and sets it down on the counter. “The Agency? Hum, not much, to be honest.” He shoots Chuuya a conspiratorial grin. “They’re working on the other side, y’know.”

“I know,” Chuuya says, absently cracking open peanut after peanut. “Just thought maybe you knew of any history between them and the mafia.” His frown lifts to Albatross. “Is it possible someone from the mafia could defect and work for them later on?”

“Not unless they’re super apt at creating fake identities. If you manage to defect, then you’d be stupid to switch to a job in the same city.” He bumps his shoulder against Chuuya’s. “Why, thinking of changing careers?”

Chuuya snorts dryly. “Fuck no. ‘m just curious because of, y’know,” he shrugs, “that thing a month ago.”

Meaning the meltdown that Dazai had when those detectives strutted into his office only to accuse him of something so ridiculous.

“I asked myself the same thing.”

That drags Chuuya’s eyes to him. “Really?”

“Yup,” Albatross grins brightly, “and I decided I’m better off not knowing.”

“Probably for the best,” Chuuya mutters, gaze falling back to his gloved fingers snapping peanuts apart.

“*However*, if you do want to dig a little deeper, your best source would be Piano Man. I remember him having a few jobs that involved spying on the Agency.”

Huh.

Interesting.

Chuuya hums out a wordless ‘thank you.’ It’s good to have friends.

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He skips the nap in favor of answers.

Answers that Dazai so clearly refuses to give him.

Piano Man's a hard man to find, but Chuuya eventually tracks him down on his way to his office. As if knowing what Chuuya is about to ask of him, Piano Man redirects their path down into the tunnels where it's 'safer' to talk.

He gives Chuuya information about the Armed Detective Agency rather easily, and that's most likely because it doesn't hold any answers to his questions.

The Agency is an interesting bunch of powered-up misfits and outcasts. Former math teachers, assassins, students, military nurses – you name it. They do have ties to the mafia; Yosano's not only Kouyou's partner, but during the Great War, she also used to be the protégé of the former boss. The same boss who also had ties with the Agency's president, Fukuzawa, once upon a time.

Interesting, yes, but simply not enough to explain why Dazai would care so much.

Chuuya supposes it's good to have an organization that protects its citizens with the help of ability users, but how that relates to Dazai or the Port Mafia's interest remains a mystery to him.

So he digs deeper, tries to be more specific, and asks Piano Man about Oda Sakunosuke.

His mother died during the birth of his little sister, leaving them alone with his father who sounds like a drunk with a mean streak. The sister died when she was twelve. Oda ended up working as an assassin for a secret organization that went out of business seven years ago. He spent two years working odd jobs here and there until he eventually joined the Agency.

Somewhere in that time, he also met Dostoevsky, though Piano Man doesn't have any information on that.

On paper, this man, Oda, has no ties to the mafia, but that doesn't mean he never had any relations with someone *from* the mafia.

Like, say, Dazai himself.

It doesn't make sense because Oda didn't seem to recognize him apart from that one time they pretended to be from the bomb squad. But it's Dazai, he is talking about. The man who shared the same fate as

Chuuya in that god-forsaken laboratory years ago without telling him. The same Dazai who protected Chuuya despite claiming he didn't care about him. The same Dazai who was rumored to spend all his time holed up in that office despite walking in and out of it as he pleased.

Still, speculations are simply speculations and Chuuya needs more than that.

So he looks Piano Man in the eye and asks him for one more thing.

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After a quick power-nap, Chuuya drags his body out of bed and to the elevator that takes him one floor higher. The office is submerged in muted silence, always so isolated from the rest of the world – almost enough to suspect that Dazai has once again left.

But when Chuuya rounds the corner, Dazai is there, sprawled across the length of his couch, gaze aimlessly fixed on the ceiling. It darts to Chuuya when he grabs the iPad resting on his chest and inspects it with a frown.

Surveillance footage of Oda Sakunosuke's kids, currently held in a location only known by Dazai. It looks like another safe house. The children are huddled around a flat screen TV. How cozy.

Chuuya ignores the scrutinizing weight of Dazai's eye that falls on him like a magnifier, searching for weaknesses to exploit, and tosses the iPad back to him. "So, what's the plan?" he asks, crossing his arms.

"You tell me," Dazai retorts with a pointed stare, snaking one arm around the back of his neck. "You're the one insisting that giving up the children will make us look weak."

"Because it *will*."

"So give me a better suggestion. Show me that you're up for it."

Chuuya draws in a tight breath. Despite Dazai's patronizing art of showing it, he *is* lending him a hand. "We'll say it was a trap set by the Bishop's Staff to make us —" he nods at Dazai "— but *you* in particular look more guilty. Start a war between our two organizations. Something that comes quite in handy for a group of religious freaks that hate ability users."

Dazai considers that with his head cocked to the side. "The children

saw you. They will be able to describe you to the Agency."

"So we'll say they used someone with the ability to shapeshift," Chuuya shoots back. "Works with that idiotic picture they presented as evidence against you as well."

"Hm," Dazai hums, clearly amused by this idea. "I have heard of such an ability."

Even though Chuuya's the one to suggest this plan, he's still not a big fan of it. The children could have given them an upper hand in this war, and he doubts that the Agency will believe this cover-story. But it's either this or something much worse.

Sighing, he raises his brows. "That a go?"

"Indeed." Dazai sits up and stretches before getting to his feet. "I have an entire unit already on stand-by. Now we will just need to arrange a meeting point with the Agency."

"They're not coming here?"

"Coming to them will be a gesture of good faith."

"Or one of submission," Chuuya points out.

Dazai dismisses that with a flick of his fingers. "You spend too much time with Kouyou whispering things into your ear. Not everything is about power. It's why I can envision you as the boss." He pauses after shrugging into his coat, dragging his gaze from the wine-red scarf in his hands to Chuuya. "Think like Chuuya. Not like the boss."

"So what is it then?" Chuuya snaps. "One moment you tell me that I'm too stupid, the next you say I should think like myself. Can you pick a damn side already and tell me what you want from me?!"

The rising volume of his voice doesn't deter Dazai from coming closer; his impish expression is as unruffled as ever as he crosses the distance between them.

"You," Dazai says, and promptly wraps the scarf around Chuuya's neck, using it to tug him closer. "I want whatever you have to offer me. This stupid decision to attack the Agency wasn't made by you, but by Kouyou, who is a political animal, god bless her, but who isn't the one that I want to see taking over eventually. I want *you.*"

Chuuya hisses out a breath. “I would have made the same decision if I found out about the children first.”

“I doubt that.”

“Don’t act like you know me better than I do.”

“But I do.” Chuuya begins to shake his head vigorously, but Dazai stops. “If you were the person that marched into the shrine months ago, you wouldn’t have made that decision.”

“Except I’m not that person anymore,” Chuuya snaps, the bitterness shredding his voice. And it’s unfair to *demand* him to be that person when Dazai has made damn sure to train him out of his foolish ways. It’s unfair and it’s illogical and it’s pointless. “I’ll ask you again. What the hell do you want from me?” His head consciously jerks back, creating not only distance but resistance. “*What* do you want, Dazai? Do you want out or not? Do you want me to take over or not? Do you want to win this war or *not?”*

Dazai looks at him, searching for something that Chuuya isn’t sure he has. Even more so, when the man’s focus slips from him, and he turns away, taking the scarf with him.

Chuuya’s skin prickles from the rejection like he has just been slapped. “Don’t do this,” he says, watching Dazai fish out his phone. “Don’t walk away without even bothering to give me a fucking answer.”

He deserves that at least, doesn’t he?

“Gin, connect me to the Agency,” Dazai murmurs as if he didn’t hear Chuuya speak. He is terribly good at that. Making people feel like a waste of air.

Chuuya’s tempted to punch the phone out of his hands. Screw the Agency, screw his precious detective, and screw this entire damn deal. But.

Somehow his sense of survival prevails.

Minutes pass; then someone must pick up the phone because Dazai’s face transforms, the persona of a haughty leader of a criminal syndicate overwriting his tired features. “President Fukuzawa, it’s lovely speaking to you again. Why I called you ask? We happen to have something of yours. Five someones actually. What I want? Nothing. Well, I would like to give them back to their care-taker

personally."

Chuuya's spine stiffens. He should have seen this coming. Of course Dazai would want to endanger himself just to be able to see that damn detective again. *Of course.*

"No surprises, I promise. You have my word. That's possible, yes?" Dazai pauses for a moment before a smile replaces his pursed lips. "I'm delighted to hear that. I'll give him thirty minutes to meet me at the place where the children reside, yes? Wonderful. Goodbye for now."

Chuuya pins him with a scowl. "Tell me you're not serious. You want to go alone?"

"It's a hand-over, not a battle," Dazai says easily. "What would it look like if I showed up with an entire battalion?"

"Like you're not worth attacking!" Chuuya exclaims. "They'll lay a hundred traps for you!"

"They won't have the time."

"Then only a dozen!"

"I'm a big boy, Chuuya. I can handle myself."

"No, you're a *stupid* boy."

All he gets is a belittling pat on his cheek and a wink. "Don't worry, it's not my time to leave yet."

Arguing with that prick of a man is as pointless as talking to a brick wall – Chuuya *knows* that. It still leaves him seething in irritation on the way to the arranged meeting point. By the time the car pulls to a stop every nerve ending of his is twitching and tingling with the need to fight something. Someone. Preferably Dazai.

But out there is that detective, that hideous trench coat of his, and his partner with the glasses. Alone, by the looks of it. Obviously a farce.

Dazai's gaze is fixed straight ahead.

"The other Agency members are probably hiding."

"And once they see that I mean no harm, they'll retreat," is the answer. "Let's go."

“They *better*,” Chuuya mutters under his breath, following him out of the car.

Dazai comes to a stop several feet away from the detective, greeting him with a dip of his head that Oda Sakunosuke has not earned. “You came. Thank you for that.”

“We came because I want them back,” Oda says stiffly, not hiding the shadow that his simmering resentment casts over Dazai. “Where are they?”

Dazai gives the man that drove the car with the kids inside a nod.

A heartbeat later, five kids come out running, attacking the detective with loud excited shouts and bear hugs. For just a few moments, Oda’s mood softens slightly. One of the boys turns to Chuuya and Dazai and flips them off. The little girl sticks out their tongue at them. It makes the other detective, Kunikida, hurry to usher them away and toward another car.

When Oda directs his attention back to them, his expression tenses again. “What do you want in return?”

“A conversation,” Dazai says.

“A conversation. That’s it?”

“Get that look off your face,” Chuuya snaps, sick of watching him disrespect Dazai. “We weren’t the ones to take those kids. It was a trap.”

“Chuuya here is telling the truth.” Dazai’s voice is silk in comparison. He even presses out a smile that toes the line between caution and… hope. “The whole thing was manufactured to deepen the rift between the Port Mafia and the Agency, and it *failed.* We never wanted to harm those children.”

When that earns him nothing but disapproving silence from the other side, Dazai turns to Chuuya. “I want to speak with the detective privately. You can take the other car home.”

Chuuya stares at him. “No way.”

“I’m not asking,” Dazai says softly.

“You’re…” The muscles around his mouth ache from the effort it takes

to suppress a snarl. After another moment of staring each other down, Chuuya shakes his head. “You can ask me to stand guard outside, but I’m not going to *leave.”*

Coming here was already risky enough. Now Dazai wants him to go?

“Please,” Dazai murmurs. For once he relies not on his authority but on his humanity as he gives Chuuya a pleading look. Then he leans closer, grazing Chuuya’s arm with the tips of his fingers, gentle, tender. “He knows the kids are safe and that we delivered them as promised. He won’t harm me.”

Chuuya yanks away from him only to whisper-hiss, “You owe me an explanation. You owe me *something.”*

“And you’ll get it.” Dazai looks at him, and his gaze is heavy, intense, unmasked. “After this, you’ll get it. I promise.”

Chuuya wants so badly to believe him. That’s always his first and his last mistake. He *wants* and Dazai knows.

He ends up forcing out a rigid nod, not having any other choice, but not before shooting the detective a look of warning. “Do something stupid, and I’ll not only flay your friend Dostoevsky alive but every single person that you care about.”

Without waiting for an answer, he turns and leaves.

Chapter End Notes

> I had to split this chapter in half bc it would have been wayyyy too much otherwise which means that the next one will be posted soon! Thank you for reading, for your patience, and for your kind and amazing feedback <3 You guys make working on this fic soooo much fun and rewarding and I really appreciate it! Love y'allllllll and see you soon

Chapter 38: The Smell of Decay

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Memories are a funny thing.

“Still too early to have a drink?” Dazai asks, settling behind the counter. A glimpse to the side reaffirms Odasaku’s pungent distrust from before, making him exhale softly. “My partner can be a little… protective, but he means well. He is a good man.”

“Partner,” Odasaku repeats like a question without the mark. “I didn’t know the leader of the Port Mafia had a partner.”

“Well, I’m unconventional that way.” More silence. “So.”

“Do you want to recruit me in return for the kids?”

Blinking in surprise, Dazai looks at him. “What makes you say that?”

“You obviously want something.”

“I told you,” Dazai struggles to speak without the air of arrogant superiority that follows him like a shadow. “The kidnapping was a set-up. They used an ability user who can shapeshift to make it look like we took your kids.” He nods a few times. “All of it, Odasaku, from your friendship with Dostoevsky to the Bishop’s Staff only pursues one goal. To enable both of our organizations to be at war with each other.”

“Let me ask you something.” He looks bothered by something. “Is ‘Odasaku’ my new nickname or something?”

“Yep.” Dazai presses out a hesitant smile before tipping his head to the side. “Nobody’s ever called you that before?”

“No.”

“Well.” he points at the counter. “Do you want something to drink to digest all this? What’s your poison?”

“Gimlet. No bitters.”

“I don’t know everything that Dostoevsky has told you about me, but

trust me, he is a conniving little rat, Odasaku. He wants something that I have. This book that I'm supposedly going to use to take over the world. But if that's the truth, why haven't I done that already?" Dazai forces out an aggravated breath. "His web of lies doesn't even make sense. I kept it to protect it *from* him."

"Kind of hard to take the word of a mafia boss for it."

Oda takes something out of his pocket and places it by his glass.

Dazai's eyes naturally draw to it.

"… what's that?"

"A sign that this negotiation is over," Odasaku explains flatly. "While I don't feel completely safe even with a gun to your head, I unfortunately don't have anything else on me right now."

Dazai looks at the weapon, trying to restrain the child that was trained to react to threats with vicious counter-violence.

"Put it away."

"I can't," Oda tells him, lightly placing his finger on the trigger. "Not when I'm up against the Port Mafia's boss – especially if this meeting itself is a trap."

"I didn't become the boss because I wanted to." Dazai's mouth shakes silently when he is met with unbending indifference. "That's the truth."

Oda's grip tightens around the gun. "Your organization promised to deliver us evidence of your supposed innocence – they failed. Then they also failed to deliver my friend. *Then* you went ahead and kidnapped innocent children, so you can sit here and tell me more lies. It's what you do. You lie. You and your partner lied about who you were back then, and you are still lying. I don't believe you. So on the spare chance I leave this meeting alive, I'll make sure that no one else will believe you either."

"This isn't a trap. I would never dream of doing such a thing to you." Yet as nothing that he says as Dazai Osamu the Port Mafia boss will change Odasaku's mind, he switches lanes, and speaks as Dazai Osamu -- friend of Oda Sakunosuke. At least, somewhere else. "The reason I lied back then was to protect you – and this world."

“This world?”

“This is one of countless worlds,” he explains. “And in another one, you and I were friends. We drank at this bar and spent time together talking about the most ridiculous things. In many of them, actually.”

For a promising moment, Oda pauses like he is considering the possibility. Yet the song remains the same. “Even if that were true, it doesn’t change anything you did.”

Dazai tries to say something but words escape him. “Odasaku, listen. I –”

“Don’t call me that.” His tone is so sharp. “My enemies have no business calling me that.”

Dazai’s face twists, eyes wandering about meaninglessly. He opens his mouth and closes it again.

“It was hard,” mutters Dazai. “It was really hard fighting Mimic without you in the organization. I had no choice but to take over for Mori and make enemies of everyone around me to expand the business. Everything I did was for this world’s –”

The rest of his sentence vanishes into thin air with a sigh. Remnant particles of his emotions wander about the diner.

There is no use telling Odasaku about what he had to do with the Port Mafia to get here. What is even the point? He insisted on having this conversation because it would be his only chance to explain his actions to Oda – and to warn him about Dostoevsky. He didn’t come here hoping to get a *thank you* or anything so hopelessly irrational; he just –

He wanted to talk to Odasaku. His friend. Just one time, he wanted to talk to him.

But maybe there is no Odasaku in this universe.

Maybe there are only Oda Sakunsouke, the detective, and Dazai Osamu, the boss of the Port Mafia who are connected by nothing except a one-sided phantom attachment of another world.

“The reason I invited you here was to tell you that Dostoevsky – he’s not only lying but a danger to everyone.” Dazai nods at him. “To you. If he gets his hands on the book, he will overwrite everything, and I

won't be able to keep you safe anymore."

"Keep me s*afe?"*

"He won't stop at nothing to get what he wants, even betraying you – *especially* betraying you. Everything that he's told you about himself and me is a careful lie that he constructed to beat me – or get the book and free the world of sinners and whatnot. He is the one behind everything. He –"

"Look, Dazai. I don't know what you believe to accomplish with your lies –"

"I'm not lying!"

"— or what you think you're doing here, but you're not keeping me, or anyone else for that matter, safe. *You* are the one endangering everyone. *You* are the one spreading chaos and death everywhere. *You* are responsible for the things that are happening on the streets."

"Please – it's not the way Dostoevsky makes it out to be."

In fact, Dostoevsky has given Dazai *his* role. It's Dostoevsky who has been lying to Oda and the Agency, who wants to see the world burn and who has caused this war and everything that comes with it.

It's *Dostoevsky,* but Oda looks at Dazai like *he* is the enemy and it's not *fair*.

It's a lie. A deception.

Dazai is no stranger to them but he is *not* the puppet master of this deception.

It's Dostoevsky – yet he doesn't have the necessary evidence to prove that nor can he kill the rat without confirming what Oda and the rest of the Agency already think of him. Once the tripartite framework collapses, there will be a bounty on the entirety of the Port Mafia. Every organization and their mother will rush into the city to get a piece of the cake when it should be the other way around. The Port Mafia and Agency working together. Not against each other. Not like this. It's wrong. All of it is wrong.

"How come that he has been in your custody for over a month now, and the organization he is supposedly running is still out there enabling witch hunts on ability users?"

Dazai's mouth opens, but after a few aimless moments it closes again. He has no answer to that either.

"We gave you this chance once before. I will give it to you once again even if it costs me my own life."

"I'm not going to kill you."

"Give up. Surrender," Oda says, ignoring him. "If not for us, do it for your people."

"Or what?" Dazai murmurs, meeting his eyes. It's not meant as a threat or a condescending reply. He genuinely wants to know what it is that awaits him.

Not a single muscle on Oda's face twists. "Or die."

That only makes him sigh. Dazai scrubs a hand over his forehead. He is tired. So tired. And yet.

"I can't do that," he admits. Even though there is nothing that sounds better right now than the prospect of death -- sweet, forever death – he gave someone a promise of three more years. He doesn't intend to break it.

"There is an official special military division tasked by the government to hunt down and capture people like you, and they already have you next on their list. Know that they will stop at nothing to fulfill their assignments. If you care as much as you claim to do… do me a favor and give yourself up to them. *That* would keep me safe."

Dazai rises to his feet in silence. Like a sweet farewell, a melancholic piano tune begins to play in the background.

"Goodbye, Odasaku."

***

Before returning to Dazai's office, Chuuya had asked Piano Man for one more thing.

That specific thing is a gilded prison cage for a rat that goes by the name of Fyodor Dostoevsky – who doesn't look like all that much when Chuuya finally takes his first proper look at him.

Apparently, his curiosity hasn't been unrequited. Dostoevsky's eyes slither up and down the length of his body with the chilling weight of

melting ice.

Chuuya leans against the wall and folds his arms over his chest, determined to keep the upper hand. “What’s your end goal here? Cause a little chaos, inconvenience Dazai, and then what? You think that will give you what you’re looking for?”

Dostoevsky regards him with more discomforting intensity before he tips his head to the side. “Does your boss know that you’re here?” he asks, squinting, eyes lit alight by a twinkle of mischief that seems disturbingly familiar. “I was under the impression that no one but him is to talk to me.”

According to Dazai *and* experience, he is a master manipulator though. Of course the same person who would accuse Dazai of being behind an organization that he himself is responsible for is able to mimic Dazai’s quirks. A chameleon, changing his colors to subconsciously appease Chuuya.

“Why?” he says. “Planning to tell him?”

“Your boss hasn’t been here to visit me for a while either. I feared that he had forgotten about me. Has he?”

Chuuya ignores the bait.

Dostoevsky scrunches his nose. “How is he by the way?”

“How about,” Chuuya pushes off the wall and approaches the devil until there is only a foot of space left between them, “I answer your question and you answer mine.”

“Chuuya,” Dostoevsky says softly, like a question, as he gazes up at him, “can I call you that?”

“No.”

“Chuuya, I can tell you anything you want to hear, but at the end of the day…” A shrug. “It won’t make the lies that he has made you believe anymore true.”

The longer he stands here in the room with this man, the faster his thread of patience unravels.

“Cut the crap!” he snaps. “You scared that you’ll get caught on camera? I can have them turned off, and we’ll be able to talk freely. Is

that what you want?"

He would do it. If it means getting answers, he would do it. The Agency is dead-set on believing in Dostoevsky's innocence anyway. Chuuya doubts that even video proof would make them change their minds.

But Dostoevsky's resolve remains unruffled. "Surveillance or no surveillance. It doesn't change anything."

Chuuya takes a deep breath, then pushes the air out of his lungs – his anger deflating along with it, only leaving numb exhaustion in its wake that hangs over his head like an oppressive cloud of mist. He is tired of chasing after the bread-crumbs that Dazai leaves him. Tired of being told what to do all the time. Tired of being a pawn in somebody else's chessboard. He is –

He blinks, giving himself a mental shake.

If there is a place to stew in his bitterness over Dazai's games, this is not the one.

Chuuya makes himself meet Dostoevsky's knowing eyes and say, "Dazai's a good performer but he wouldn't lie. Not to me."

It's a half-truth. Dazai has no issue lying to him. He does it all the time. And they both know that. Even Dostoevsky knows that. But there is also some truth to it.

Dazai lied about a lot of things but he did not lie about Dostoevsky. That Chuuya knows with a concerning certainty because he was, by his side, on the floor, in his bed, when Dazai let that one miscalculation tear down the thick stone walls that surround him at all times.

"Is that what you think?"

The skin around Dostoevsky's eyes bunches, making him appear so small all of a sudden, so frail and *disappointed,* that Chuuya for an odd second even thinks that he will burst into tears. Dostoevsky doesn't cry but the tide of sorrow that overcomes Chuuya doesn't ebb.

He finds it hard to remember what it is that they are talking about, let alone an answer. Eventually though the words come to him. Dazai. This is about Dazai. It's always about Dazai.

Is that what you think?

“It’s what I know.”

“Then why are you here?”

That’s the question. Why *is* he?

Chuuya can’t find the answer but he does find something else, and it’s the knowledge, buried somewhere in the back of his head, that he shouldn’t be here.

“It doesn’t matter,” he mutters and turns around to leave. “This was a mistake.”

“So was my arrest,” he hears Dostoevsky say.

The words make Chuuya pause.

Even knowing that Dostoevsky is a master at deception, he can’t help but marvel at how human his voice sounds. How *real.* Like he truly is just an innocent civilian that got caught in the crossfire between a heartless mob boss who wanted a scapegoat for his crimes.

Maybe it’s because Chuuya can relate. He doesn’t remember much of that life before – the one that he spent submerged in thick darkness for years, being the toy of greedy politicians and scientists looking for more power. No one was there for him either. No one ever bothered to ask whether he deserved to be there. No one came to save him.

He shakes his head.

But that’s wrong. Dazai was the one who was there in that laboratory beside him, who went through the same exact thing except that he did not get the mercy of losing these memories.

It’s Dostoevsky who threatened to put him back into such a place.

But the sorrow remains and the sorrow is real. So real that Chuuya feels it pulse inside him like a black hole that steals everything good and leaves only pain in its wake.

Chuuya looks over his shoulder, at the man sitting cross-legged on the floor, and everything starts to make a little more sense.

“My friends are dead because of you.”

That's where it's all coming from.

Dostoevsky is the living, breathing reminder of what happened that day. Of course talking to him would hurt.

"Is that so?"

"You knew about corruption," Chuuya tells him. "Dazai said you knew how to trigger it."

Never in those exact words but that's how it must have been like.

Only from Dostoevsky's mouth this obvious conclusion tastes like a fallacy. "Has he now? And did he tell you how he knew that?"

Chuuya doesn't answer, a little curious how much Dostoevsky actually knows about the two of them, willing to play a helpless idiot to find out.

"I mean, truly, how did you end up on that rooftop, Chuuya?" he goes on, gesturing around himself. "How did you end up *here?"*

Chuuya gives him a one-sided shrug. "I wanted to save my friend from prison."

"And a bunch of sheep were that important to the Port Mafia?"

"You're implying that Dazai wanted me here?" Chuuya scoffs loudly. "Obviously. I figured that much. But he had his reasons –" he pauses deliberately "– and most of them are better than yours."

"And the one that isn't, is that why you are here?"

Hook. Line. Sinker.

"I just thought it's time you and I met face to face," Chuuya lies with a slightly exaggerated twitch of his jaw.

"Which part of his story doesn't make sense to you?" Dostoevsky continues, willfully ignoring Chuuya's flimsy excuse. "Is it the book? Do you honestly believe he has it all this time without using it for his benefit? Think about it. Think of everything that it could have been used to. Unexplained mysteries. Favorable events." He pauses to let out a breath. "Bringing people back."

During Chuuya's years on the street in Suribachi city there was this distinct smell in the air whenever someone died — which was a near-

daily occurrence in the lawless land of people who didn't belong anywhere. A mixture of rotting flesh and blood and human waste. The smell of decay. It filled him with a sense of dread, the possibility of finding one of his friends too real. No matter how many people he saw die, the same pure unadulterated terror overcame him every single time and stuffed his mouth with bile.

He feels it now. The smell of decay.

"You can't bring people back with the book."

Dostoevsky raises his brows. "Is that so?"

Chuuya shakes his head, not sure anymore whether he is playing a role or being himself. "It's not possible."

"Oh, so he said it," Dostoevsky guesses effortlessly, and gives Chuuya a sympathetic smile that would look condescending if it wasn't for the sinking feeling in his stomach. "Let me guess. You would have brought your friends back. Undo the damage that was done but he wouldn't let you. Of course he wouldn't. Why would he? Without your friends, he has you all to himself. His perfect little weapon, obeying his every whim and command. *Too bad* that he doesn't mind bringing back people himself." Noticing Chuuya flinch like a predator scenting blood, Dostoevsky huffs out a soft breath. "Don't look at me like that. You know who I'm talking about."

The same person that Chuuya came here for in the first place.

Except it doesn't make sense, does it?

If Dazai used the book to bring Oda back, they must have known each other before – why else would he use such a powerful thing for a virtual stranger?

But the answer is as simple as it is cruel.

Chuuya doesn't know how the book works. He doesn't know anything that Dazai hasn't told him, which isn't much, or anything at all, really.

This could be the thing that Chuuya was looking for.

But for now, Chuuya directs his attention elsewhere – to Dostoevsky. "You admit that you're not really a friend of Oda's?"

Dostoevsky's gaze casts to the ground, a faint, private smile on his

lips. “I stumbled upon him as I was searching for the book; that doesn’t mean he is any less of my friend.”

“So what?” Chuuya asks. “That man… Oda Sakunosuke is a creation of the book?” He makes himself sound more disbelieving than he actually is. The more he resists Dostoevsky’s obvious manipulation tactics, the more Dostoevsky pushes – and gives away. “It doesn’t make any sense. If Dazai is as terrible as you make him out to be, why would he care so much about one irrelevant detective?”

Dostoevsky’s gaze lifts to him. “Does it have to make sense when feelings are involved, Chuuya?” That word, *feelings*, makes Chuuya’s chest throb sickeningly. “Does your devotion to a man who has brought you nothing but ruin and death make sense?”

Images of the sheep assault him. Yuan saying that she is leaving with tears in her eyes. De Luca trying to warn him over and over. Mimi hugging him only hours before Chuuya crushes her and the rest of his friends – his innocent, helpless friends – *to death.*

A montage of his failures replaying like a broken record player, over and over, again and again.

Karma’s expression when the bullet punctured his skin. The wounded and frightened child that he was the first time they met, a stray who had known nothing but abuse by the hands of the mafia.

Ace whispering that he is going to carve the resistance out of him. Arousal in his voice.

Dazai.

Dazai, stepping up on the altar, making Chuuya his husband and dragging him into the heart of his nest.

Dazai’s mouth against him.

Dazai’s arms around him, warm and safe and *tight.* Refusing to let him leave.

Dazai delivering the news of the sheep’s death. The ragged sound of Chuuya’s wail in a quiet hospital room.

Dazai telling him that he was only ever supposed to be his replacement because he wanted out. He wanted out. He wanted out. He wanted out, out, out –

And Chuuya never understood why he was *here* in the first place, what made him stay for so long, what held him here –

Dazai giving the order to leave the Detective alone over and over and over.

Dazai building an entire empire just for one person. One man. One detective.

Chuuya's eyes squeeze shut from the pain. He feels split down in the middle. Cut open. Raw. It's always the same, always the same spiel, the same game, and he only ever ends up as somebody's fucking pawn.

It brings him to his knees, and then –

A hand brushes his knuckles. Chuuya's head slowly lifts, eyes stinging from the overwhelming urge to fall apart right here and now. But for some reason, it's not Dazai who is across from him, always there when he ends up like this, on the ground, unleashed and alone.

It's someone who looks a lot like him, who acts like him, hauntingly similar, but in the end, is only a mirage.

"You and I, we've both been played by the same man, Chuuya. And all of this is because of his obsession with one man – that I happened to befriend on my journey to escape his claws. Why else do you think does he hate me so terribly? It's all because of him. Because of Oda Sakunosuke."

It's then that Chuuya notices *it.* The lightness of his chest. No pain, no shame, no guilt, no jealousy, no nothing. Just… empty air. And it feels good. Too good.

Chuuya hasn't felt this light in months. Maybe never.

Pieces that he didn't even know were there click into place, and suddenly the answer to a thousand questions is painfully obvious.

Dostoevsky's not the kind of master manipulator that Dazai is, reading humans like books, then weaving them like thread beneath his needle.

He is a master manipulator because he actually manipulates people's emotions.

If Chuuya has the ability to manipulate gravity, then Dostoevsky's skill

is to… manipulate feelings.

Pain, in particular.

And the most awful thing about it is – for a second, Chuuya doesn't care. He just *wants.* He wants to hold onto this temporary rush of relief, wants to bask in it, wants to live with it no matter if it's real or not.

Except that when he closes his eyes, he sees it again. That picture of Dazai lying on the bathroom floor. Stiff, cold, lifeless. Even though he can't physically feel the pain right now, he still remembers what that all-consuming trepidation tasted like in his mouth. And it's worse than all the heartache and the grief that comes from loving Dazai. So much worse.

Dostoevsky can take his pain away, can inflict it on him even. It won't change a thing.

Chuuya can take all of it as long as Dazai remains in the world of the living and by his side – because that is how *Chuuya* stays alive.

He forces the air out of his tight lungs, still staring at Dostoevsky.

Chuuya understands now, he thinks, how Dostoevsky operates, how he is able to control so many people, most of whom most likely don't even realize that they are being manipulated. They just know that they hurt less in his presence and suddenly they long to be on his side.

So it's all too easy to give into it. To play the role of the hurting believer, longing to receive mercy by his benevolent god.

"It couldn't have been all a lie," he whispers through the brittle voice of someone who aches from being everyone's tool. "It doesn't make sense. I don't believe it." He shakes his head. "I *can't.*"

Dostoevsky lifts his fingers to Chuuya's face, cupping his cheeks and making him look at him. "Then tell me one thing: what other explanation is there?"

Chuuya forces his lips open and closed, brain racing for the things he would say if he actually believed him –

He fails.

His mask cracks with the breathless giggle that bursts from his mouth.

Dostoevsky pauses across from him and it makes Chuuya laugh even harder.

“Sorry,” he says, trying to stifle another fit from erupting with a fist pressed to his lips. Dostoevsky lets go of him, not needing an explanation to figure out that he has lost him. “I tried. I did.” Sighing, Chuuya lifts his wary eyes to the man. “What can I say? I’m a shitty liar.”

Dostoevsky’s eyes narrow at him before he huffs out a breath and folds his hands in his lap, pinching the tips of his finger. “Don’t disrespect yourself like that, Chuuya. For a few minutes, you had both of us fooled.”

That’s not an exaggeration.

For a minute, the sweet absence of pain was almost tempting enough to numb Chuuya’s senses.

But sweetness is best enjoyed briefly. Not for too long. Lest you grow used to it.

Something about that pulls Chuuya’s attention back to the man in front of him. Is it possible that the manipulation not only works on everyone around him but on himself too? What remains of a person when you take away your ability to feel pain? How much humanity is left in there?

By the looks of it, not much.

Dostoevsky operates on something other than the rest of them all. No wonder he has a massive god complex.

“I feel sorry for you,” Chuuya says, rising to his feet. It must be tough having to rely on others’ pain to get them to tolerate you. “What’s the point of all this without the pain?”

“Clarity,” Dostoevsky responds. “I see what the rest of you cannot see.”

“And what’s that?”

“Salvation.”

Maybe he should have played along to try to find out and more, but even this brief stint has worn him out enough already – physically and

mentally; the pain is back, too, maybe even more of it as a punishment, but hey, Chuuya doesn't mind anymore.

He turns around and shoves his hands into his pockets. "You'll get your salvation, Dostoevsky. Soon. Trust me."

What better salvation than death?

"Oda Sakunosuke will always be his first priority," Dostoevsky says behind him. "You can kill, live, and die for him, but you will never take the detective's place."

It's a good thing then, that it is not Chuuya's goal.

***

Chuuya stays up that night and waits. For what, he hasn't decided yet. Only once he sees Dazai and looks him in the eye will he know what to demand – the complete and utter truth, the promises they once made to each other, or something else entirely.

Hours pass and Chuuya sits on the bed in Dazai's living space and he waits.

It reminds him of his very first night in the mafia. That evening, he, too, spent hours upon hours waiting for the mafia boss to come and claim his price only to end up with a rejection and a tattoo appointment. He had no idea what he was in for back then. His scheme was so incredibly naïve in hindsight that it makes him laugh.

Overthrow the mafia from within? Seriously. How childish he was. How painfully stupid to believe such a plan could ever work.

And yet it is ironic that Chuuya is here now, residing in the very heart of the mafia, having not only a say in its politics but the ear of enough echelons that he would likely even have a decent shot if he staged a coup.

The mere idea sounds absurd to him.

The only reason he is here is because of Dazai. There is no kingdom worth ruling over without him.

But as absurd as it is, it is also… exciting. It's just a tiny spark, really, one single seed that's buried somewhere at the bottom of his soul that pulses with pride at the mere fact that he *could* if he wanted to. He

could. A human experiment, a street rat, a nobody being able to rule over an organization this powerful.

It sounds like cosmic irony.

***

Chuuya hears movement outside the bedroom deep into the night. The thud of the office's double-door. The footsteps that pause, probably at the desk, then carry on until finally, Dazai appears in the doorway.

He has lost his coat on his way here, now only wearing a white-button up, his slacks, and a miserable expression on his bandaged face.

The smell of cheap pub air and whiskey follows him and wafts into the bedroom.

He is drunk.

Chuuya gazes back, silent. His stare twitches when Dazai comes to a stop right in front of him and freezes when the man drops to his knees, meeting his wide, apprehensive eyes.

"Forgive me."

Little by little, like the first rays of spring, relief dampens the surprise. Chuuya places one hand around the back of Dazai's neck, rubbing circles into his skin with the tip of his thumb, and strokes his head with the other. Dazai rests his cheek on his thigh.

"I'm sorry," he whispers with the voice of a man so defeated that Chuuya has to push curiosity and, worse, empathy out of his lungs with a sigh. "Don't leave me. Please."

"Look at me," Chuuya says.

Dazai's chest shudders against his knee but he refuses to lift his head for him.

"Look at me." This time, Chuuya cups his chin and gives him no choice but to meet his firm gaze. "I made you a promise once and I don't intend to break it. I will never leave you."

"You vowed to kill all my enemies. Not that you'd stay by my side until the end of times."

"That's not the oath I'm talking about."

Dazai's eye twitches.

He may have asked for that when he was at his most vulnerable, but it doesn't make it, neither the request nor the answer, any less true.

"Come here," Chuuya murmurs, guiding Dazai closer until their faces are only a breath apart, the air between them filled with static.

Dazai's still on his knees, his one eye still wide in bewilderment and his limbs still stiff from the cold and whatever transpired with the detective, but when Chuuya traces his jaw with his thumb before pressing a kiss to his cold lips, Dazai kisses him back.

Chuuya doesn't think they have ever done this, kiss each other so slowly that it borders on timidity, seeking not heat but comfort. A strange thing to do as someone who lives with a restlessness inside him that refuses to ebb. Then again, the wild thrill of arousal has been replaced by something else: the rush of holding Dazai's heart within his hand, of being his pillar when he falls apart, and of something viciously possessive deep in his veins. No matter what has happened before, no matter who Dazai was with, at the end of the night Dazai will always end up… here. With Chuuya.

Cupping the back of Dazai's neck, Chuuya directs him onto the bed; then he fists his fingers in Dazai's collar and asks, "What do you need?"

Dazai pauses above him. Chuuya pries his eyes open only to see him shake his head, not even able to form words.

That's okay. They don't need verbal language to communicate.

Chuuya's fingers follow the length of his body until he finds the inside of his thighs, asking him a silent question. Maybe Dazai wants to get fucked until that brain of his can take a break. Maybe he wants to fuck Chuuya, hard and rough. Maybe something lighter, mouth, fingers. Maybe nothing at all.

A moment later, Dazai answers by dropping his forehead on his shoulder.

With an exhale, Chuuya draws him closer until Dazai is practically lying on top of him, clinging to his waist like a frightened kid as Chuuya strokes his hair gently.

Dazai really is pathetic sometimes. So many masks and shadow-

personas when inside he is just a goddamn man-child who will beg Chuuya not to leave him.

And still.

Chuuya plants a kiss on the top of his head.

He would burn down cities for this man, no questions asked.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading and all the lovely comments!!!! <3 Next chapter we will FINALLY have:
- ANSWERS
- a compromise
- and... a little surprise

Chapter 39: The Long Game

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Dazai's breathing evens out and he falls into a slumber, right there on top of him. Chuuya, however, stays awake.

He will let Dazai catch up on sleep – god knows, he needs it. Afterward though, they will have a serious conversation, and this time, Dazai will be more open to giving Chuuya the answers that he wants.

By the time Dazai shows the first signs of waking, Chuuya's entire side has grown numb. As uncomfortable as the prickling sensation of being stabbed by a thousand muted needles is though, he still wishes this could last for a few more moments. It's warm. Jiji joined them a few hours ago, curled up by his side. Nothing to do here but *rest.* One of those rare moments that slip through your fingers before you can even blink, as perfect as they are fickle.

Dazai grunts a little as his eye flutters open, orienting himself with a sleep-laced squint until he finds Chuuya.

"Hey."

Sighing, Dazai nuzzles his face back against his chest, his response muffled and unintelligible.

Chuuya stretches his arms and finally allows himself to roll to his side – much to Dazai's whiny dislike. "Are you finally going to talk to me?" Chuuya asks, sliding the tips of his fingers over Dazai's nose that wrinkles at the question.

"Must I?"

"Yes."

A dreary sigh. Then, at last, he meets Chuuya's gaze. "Where do you want me to start?"

"Start with *him,*" he answers. "Oda Sakunosuke."

He sees Dazai fight the urge to look away. "Okay." But when he opens

his mouth again to speak, it's Chuuya who slaps a hand over his mouth to silence him.

"Wait."

Dazai makes a confused noise against his palm.

"I need wine first." Chuuya crawls across the bed to climb off it. "I'm not having this conversation sober."

"We can skip it altogether," he hears Dazai call after him.

They can't.

Chuuya may dread it like every sane person dreads removing a thorn that's stuck in their foot, but unless he wants it to fester and poison his blood, it's better to get over with it now.

It's not like he doesn't have his suspicions anyway.

He passes Kafka, still idly resting in front of the fireplace, on his way to the wine cabinet where he spends his sweet time choosing the bottle that will numb his senses the quickest.

When he comes back, Dazai is unraveling the bandages around his face.

"We are not skipping this," Chuuya tells him with a decisive nod before he takes a seat next to him, pops the cork open and lifts the bottle to his mouth, taking several generous gulps.

It's Dazai who gently pries the wine out of his grip and shoots him a pointed look. "I'm not doing this twice, so cool it."

"Trust me," Chuuya wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, the heat that sinks down his chest solidifying his voice, "I won't forget."

Being the hypocrite that he is, Dazai steals a sip as well. Chuuya doesn't call him out on it.

"Before I tell you about Odasaku," he starts, looking straight ahead, his fingers clenched tightly around the bottle, "I first have to tell you about The Book."

"The Book. That the Agency accused you of having, right?"

Dazai nods. "I do have it. They were right about that. But I never used

it for any of the things that they accused me of. I didn't use it all."

Already, a hundred new questions buzz around Chuuya's head but he doesn't voice any of them yet.

"I was young. I had spent my entire life in this tower, being shaped like clay by the boss — my father. So when I escaped his clutch, I was a lost puppet without its master. I had no sense of purpose, no goals, no nothing, I just… wandered. Dostoevsky was the first person that I met that caught my interest." He huffs to himself, eyes casting to his lap. "I didn't share his passion but I was able to see the logic in it. If it hadn't been for my ability, I would have never landed in that laboratory, you know?" His gaze lifts to meet Chuuya's. "And for a long, long time, I believed it was the laboratory that had made me the way I am. So wrong and empty. Different. I thought they had taken something from me. I was too young to realize that there was nothing there, to begin with."

Nodding, Chuuya draws his knees to his chest.

"In the end, Dostoevsky was the same as everyone that I had run from, just in a different color. My father. My siblings. The Port Mafia. The military research facility that had experimented on us. When I realized that, I let him do as he pleased; it didn't really matter to me. The book that he told me about though? Now that was something that I wanted to get my hands on. I thought that maybe if I found it, I could write down never being in that laboratory and change history.

"I spent months tracking it down and eventually I found it," the shadow of a cheerless smile flickers across his face, dimming the light in his eyes, "tucked away inside a real book by a nameless author in the apartment of a former assassin, who also happened to be an aspiring novelist."

"Oda," Chuuya guesses out loud, brows furrowed. "That was him."

Dazai frowns in surprise but doesn't question why he possesses that knowledge. It's rather obvious. "Yes. That person was Oda."

So that's how they met?

Except, Chuuya's brows furrow harder, Oda didn't recognize Dazai back then, at the former national defense force. But even if he knew Dazai, he does not act like someone who *likes* him. So why in the world would Dazai care so much?

“And?” Chuuya demands when seconds fly by but Dazai remains silent, lost somewhere in that head of his. “What happened after that?”

“Then I stole the book and left before he came back.”

“You didn’t… meet?”

“No,” Dazai says, so aggravatingly patient that Chuuya has to dig his fingers into his skin to stop himself from reaching inside the man and physically dragging the answers out of him. “No, we didn’t meet. I took The Book somewhere safe and when I opened it to use it, something happened. I’m not sure what exactly; I never told anyone about it, but my guess is that my ability interacted with the book and created a singularity.”

“Like corruption?” Chuuya murmurs.

Dazai nods. “Yes, something like that. It… made me see things.”

Chuuya’s brows lift in question.

“You see, when you write something into the book, say…” he makes a vague hand gesture “… a brand-new building that hasn’t existed before, it doesn’t simply appear out of nowhere while the world stays the same. It creates an entirely new universe with that thing inside.”

After a long moment of staring, Chuuya says, “You’re kidding.”

He is not kidding. He is actually telling the truth – at least the one he believes in. But it’s Dazai. He couldn’t be so epically wrong about this.

“An entire new universe for one tiny thing that’s written into some book?” Chuuya lifts his hand to massage his temple. “My head hurts just thinking about it.” The silence drags his attention back to Dazai, his words echoing in Chuuya’s ears. “Wait, you said it made you see things. Like other…?”

“Like other universes,” Dazai confirms with an exhausted smile. “… All of them.”

Chuuya feels his heart break in slow-motion, shattering into a thousand pieces; his expression follows suit. He opens his mouth, trying to say something but no matter how hard he thinks, nothing comes to him.

“How?” is what he eventually rasps out, slack-jawed. “How do you even… function with all that knowledge – how?”

“Oh, you know,” Dazai shrugs, “it’s a matter of practice.”

“Practice,” Chuuya echoes in disbelief.

Dazai’s eyes flicker to him but when they take in Chuuya’s crestfallen face, he abruptly looks away and gets to his feet, lifting the wine to inhale its contents.

Chuuya can’t blame him.

All this time, he thought that Dazai’s unhealthy drug and sleeping habits had come from a life raised in the mafia, and they did – except there is an additional mountain of baggage on top of that.

Universes.

Entire universes — and Dazai knows about them all while *still* being surprisingly normal.

“Heh, would you stop looking like that?” Dazai wears the thick layer of humor like armor to protect himself from any pity or, god forbid, sympathy. “You’re making me feel worse about it than it actually is.”

Clearing his throat, Chuuya struggles to get his emotions under control. He musters a nod after another gulp. “I just… I can’t wrap my head around it, is all.”

“Neither could I when it happened.” The wine appears in his vision, and Chuuya gratefully accepts it. “But it did, and after some weeks of adjusting to that boulder-sized history lesson in the back of my head, I managed to get it under control. It requires copious amounts of drugs, but oh well, it was worth it, because suddenly I remembered… I remembered everything that my other selves in all the other universes out there did with their lives, what they fought for, who they loved…”

Chuuya’s eyes slowly slide back to him. He swallows the wine in his mouth with a loud gulp.

Dazai tilts his head to him, and his smile sets the thundering heart in Chuuya’s chest on fire. “I remembered you.”

“Me?” he echoes dumbly, shrinking under his attention all of a sudden.

Somehow he hasn't even considered the possibility that he might have been in any of the other universes.

"You, Chuuya. You," Dazai says with a chuckle before spinning around and leaning down to cup both of his knees. "You are like the sun, you know. You are there, in every single universe. You're always there."

At this point, Chuuya really doesn't know what to say anymore. What does that even mean?

And then Dazai sighs and says, "And I hated you for it."

Chuuya's surprise shifts into a scowl. "The hell? You hated me – for *what?!"*

"Well, imagine seeing a thousand universes, and in every single one, we're together." Dazai smacks his hands together. Loudly. "Like it's destined or something. Written in the stars. Wouldn't you be annoyed?" He cocks his head. "And hate it just out of spite?"

"I mean –" Chuuya frowns furiously, lips parting and closing over and over. "I mean, yeah, but fuck you anyway! It's not my fault that we're – we're like… that –" The heat rising to his cheeks burns his words to a crisp. He is not sure what to think about the fact that apparently, the two of them are somehow *together* in a thousand universes, let alone the fact that Dazai is not a fan.

"I'm aware of that *now.* Back then, however…" Dazai spreads his hands. "It bothered me. I didn't understand it. When I thought of you, I remembered the laboratory, and that made me loathe you. And suddenly there was this book with all these…worlds… and I hated you even more. You were my predetermined destiny in every single world out there, and all I wanted was to write my own ending. Just once."

It takes a few moments to translate these words into something that makes sense. "When did you find out?"

"Almost five years ago now."

"Five years," Chuuya murmurs to himself, nodding. "That's how long you've known."

How long Dazai has known *him.* About them.

When he lifts his gaze, Dazai presses his lips together quietly, and

Chuuya rolls his eyes. “I don’t care that you didn’t want to see me. I’d probably have felt the same.”

“Oh,” the idiot says. “Well, that’s a shame because I’m clearly amazing _”

“Shut up.”

“Okay.”

That explains… quite a few things in hindsight. A thousand tiny mysteries that begin to unravel.

“So those other universes. They’re all somewhere in the back of your head?” Try as he might, Chuuya can’t imagine what that must be like. “Do they feel like your own memories? Isn’t that confusing?”

“It is.” Dazai’s smile wavers; he lets himself drop to the floor. “Well, it was at first. Eventually, I learned how to push them away, so they don’t mix with my own. They feel like memories of a dream that I once had. Sometimes it’s almost like they are sealed away somewhere, but the lock is a little rusty, and…” His hand unconsciously lifts to rub the place where his heart sits in his chest. “… every now and then a fragment slips through the cracks.”

“Like my favorite wine,” Chuuya says, eyelids fluttering as the realization sinks in. “Because that’s the wine of some other Chuuya you remember.”

A nod.

And, at last, the final epiphany clicks into place with a thud.

“Is that where you know him from? Oda?”

Dazai lifts his head to look at him before he gives him one more nod.

Chuuya’s jaw stings from clenching his teeth but he still says, “Tell me. We’ve gotten this far.”

What’s one more truth?

Dazai casts his gaze to his fingers, absently picking at the bandages around his wrist. “We were friends. In one of the universes he wasn’t in the Agency but here, in the mafia. A handyman at the bottom of the chain who didn’t kill. And we met every other night to drink and just chat. In another one, he saved me by taking away the bottle of gin in

my hand and giving me a paintbrush. We… ” He pauses to breathe. “We were friends.”

“You were friends.”

Did you love that friend?

“And he died.”

Chuuya freezes.

“He always dies, Chuuya.” Dazai’s eyes are feverish when they meet Chuuya’s. “Every time. Can you imagine? If you are the one whose side I always end up on, no matter what, he is the one who always dies. No matter what. I’m never fast enough to save him. I fail at it every single time.”

“That’s why you refuse to even entertain the idea of attacking him or the Agency,” Chuuya murmurs.

“That’s why I refuse to even entertain the idea of attacking him or the Agency.” His fingers twitch with every breath that he sucks into his lungs. “I think this is the only universe where he might actually survive and write novels and… live his life. Is it so wrong to want to give him this one chance?”

Never in a thousand years did Chuuya imagine that Dazai’s strange attachment to the detective came from a million parallel universes. But he was prepared to come to this conclusion – that Dazai knows him, that he’s part of Dazai’s heart. It doesn’t make the knife that cuts through his heart hurt any less. Doesn’t make it easier to breathe when he feels so small and unimportant all of a sudden. Doesn’t make the heat of resentment burn kinder in his blood.

Chuuya leans forward on his elbows until he catches Dazai’s gaze and asks, “Have you ever considered that the man you wish to save is not the man that you know?”

Dazai instantly shakes his head. “It’s still Odasaku, no matter what universe.”

“And he is wrapped around Dostoevsky’s finger, isn’t he?” Chuuya cocks his brows. “What happened after you sent me away? What did he say to you?”

“Isn’t what I told you already enough,” Dazai mutters sullenly.

“Not nearly.”

After a pitiful silence, he speaks. “He doesn’t believe me.”

“You told him about the book?”

“I tried to. But he didn’t believe me.”

“You hated me – the idea of me, yet I’m still here,” Chuuya mutters more to himself than anything else. Getting to his feet, he runs a hand through his hair.

Dazai watches him pace from the floor. “It was…”

“It was just part of the plan, right?” Chuuya helps him out. “I remember what you told me but only now do I have the full picture.” A bark of laughter ripples from his throat. “You said you wanted me to take over as the boss because you wanted *out*. I never understood why you became the boss in the first place until now.” He halts. “It was because of *him*. To protect him.”

The bedroom is dead-silent for a few moments.

“It was the only way I knew how.”

“Except that you hated the job and wanted out. But not just out of the mafia. You wanted an actual out. You wanted to die.” Chuuya coughs an unsteady breath, shaking his head over and over. “You thought that if you just … made sure that he was safe – that I would make sure of it too, that your job would be done. That you could rest peacefully.”

“You *are* going to make sure of it,” Dazai responds with a piercing gaze.

“You promised,” Chuuya whispers. “You promised me *years*.”

“And I intend to hold that promise.”

“By sabotaging yourself?!”

“Precisely.”

Dumbfounded, Chuuya stares at him, trying to see through this one word.

Precisely.

Angering his people wasn't merely a risk that Dazai was willing to accept. No, that was the point. And that means…

"You want to turn your own people against you," Chuuya deduces in a breathless murmur. "You want them to turn them against you for… me."

Dazai folds his hands together in his lap, so oddly innocent compared to the cutthroat smile that he flashes him. "You get to be the boss. I get to leave. He stays alive." His eyes flutter shut for a brief second as if he is envisioning that future that he just painted for Chuuya. "Everyone is happy."

Chuuya makes a feral noise. "Where does that leave you?!"

"Wherever I want to."

"What the hell does that mean?!"

"It means that I will die. To my people, I will die, but I won't actually die. I'll… " Dazai wags his shoulders like he is talking about a picnic and not faking his own fucking death. "… just stay undercover, keep you company from the shadows, do the things that I've never let myself do before."

Chuuya throws up his hands. "Why in the world would you want such a thing?"

"Why would I not? I don't want this life." Dazai's voice catches; he has to suck in a breath before speaking again. "I *never* did. I'm good at it – perfect – but I despise it."

"And so you decided I would be better at it?"

Dazai's head draws back with wounded surprise. "I asked you to leave with me. You didn't want that. So I stayed. For you."

"Because I can't just leave," Chuuya hisses, backing away from him. His head hurts like a motherfucker. He needs more wine. "It's not right… you fake-dying or whatever the hell is not right."

"At this point, it's the best option," Dazai prattles on, so rational about this that it's diabolical. "Our enemies are circling. The Agency hired a special military division just to capture me."

That makes him spin around, slicing his arm through the air. "Fuck

them! I'll kill whoever tries to come near you!"

"No," Dazai says – he *commands* as he holds Chuuya's gaze like a leash, "you will let them kill me."

"Like hell, I will. No. *Never*."

"It's only for show, so yes, Chuuya, you will."

"I don't want to spend years pretending that you're dead. I don't *want* any of this without you," Chuuya snarls, unconcerned about how childish he sounds. Dazai can't make him do this. He refuses to.

But this is Dazai, who apparently is not only fluent in the language of Chuuya but in a thousand other Chuuyas. Dazai knows him, inside out and out. He knows how to get a rise out of him. Knows where to touch to make him moan, gasp, and beg. Knows the buttons to push to make him play by his rules. Knows what to say – exactly what to say to turn a forest fire into a gentle flame.

This time, it's an exhausted sigh; the sigh of a man who has lived a thousand lives; and a small, flickering candle-light smile, the one reserved for moments like these. Chuuya knows all this, and still, he can already feel himself getting sucked into his pain. The burden he has been bearing.

Dazai stands. Stalks slowly toward him, keeping eye contact with each step until Chuuya's back hits the wall and there is nowhere to turn to except Dazai. Dazai's hands, cupping Chuuya's face, forcing him to look at him. To listen. "It's not like I'll be actually gone." His fingers trace the dip of his cheekbones. "I'll just… operate from the background. I'll do your paperwork if you want to," he jokes, mouth bending into a lopsided grin.

"You're shit at doing your paperwork," Chuuya tells him with dried-up mockery.

"I'll get better at it if it's for my husband who is the boss."

He closes his eyes in disbelief. His body clenches itself. "This is insane."

Dazai leans closer and his breath washes over the shell of Chuuya's ear. "It's the best way to get through this mess with everyone alive and well."

“You grossly underestimate your people. They’re not going to accept me.”

“They already have.”

“Being an executive is not the same as being their *boss*.”

“Trust me,” Dazai says so matter-of-factly that Chuuya’s knuckles itch to punch the nonchalance out of him. But his next words wipe the snarl off his lips. “They will come to love you, just as I did.”

Chuuya stares at him, his throat paper-fucking dry. Why would he say such a stupid thing? So casually too. “You’re insane,” he hisses because he doesn’t know what else to say – how to even say it. War is easier than responding to a love confession. “I would let the Agency burn just to keep you warm. You realize that, right? I am *not* the same person from your memories. I am not some other Chuuya who cares about those people.”

Maybe that’s why Dazai is able to say things like that. Maybe all this time, he was seeing someone in Chuuya that was not here. Whether there are universes out with the two of them – it doesn’t matter because it’s not *this* universe. Not *them*.

Yet, again, Dazai does not even bat an eye. “You know the truth, so you won’t.”

“They are on Dostoevsky’s side.”

“Because he tricked them. Your job will be to show them the truth.”

Chuuya puffs out a breath. “I don’t care enough to do that.”

“You care about me.”

“*You.*” Chuuya’s teeth clench. “Not them.”

“They’re good people.”

“Fuck that. The sheep were good people and I killed them too.”

“You will make an amazing boss. You have the skills, the power, the vision. You are perfect for the job – and if you decide that you aren’t, I will come up with another plan before spiriting you away to the countryside where you can… do whatever you want – where *we* can do whatever we want together.”

“And what about your precious Oda?” he asks, failing to keep the bitterness out of his tone.

Dazai’s eyes fall on him, dark and all-knowing. “I’ll make arrangements. He will be taken care of.”

“Absurd –” Swallowing, Chuuya shakes his head. “This plan of yours is absurd.” He keeps repeating the same handful of words but he doesn’t know what else to say. Letting Dazai do something so idiotic goes against everything that he believes in, yet forcing him to stay in this role is not something that Chuuya can do with good conscience either. Not when he was the one who had to drag Dazai out of that damned bathtub and punch the air back into his cold, dead lungs.

“It’s okay, Chuuya,” Dazai murmurs, so close that their mouths hover over each other, “you’re allowed to accept this. To *want* this.”

“Except you said the opposite a day ago.” Chuuya’s lips curl. “You had no problem reminding me who’s the boss.”

It’s aggravating how easily Dazai is able to shrug off his hypocrisy. “You were screwing with my plan. Now you know, so that won’t be a problem anymore.”

“So you want me to take over – but only as long as I play by your rules. And what if I don’t? What if I say yes, and slaughter the Agency anyway?”

“You wouldn’t do that,” Dazai says, awfully confident for a man that is standing across from someone with the blood of *hundreds* of people on his hands.

Sometimes Chuuya thinks neither of them knows what he is truly capable of.

“Why not?” He juts out his chin and it makes the tips of their noses bump against each other. Still, Chuuya doesn’t back down because *why the hell wouldn’t he slaughter the people who are dumb enough to fall for Dostoevsky’s games? And why should he accept the role of the boss only to let Dazai still call the shots in the end?*

“Because,” Dazai’s mouth curves into a sickening smile, “you don’t want any of this without me. That’s what you said. And I don’t want the countryside without you. Chuuya, you and I, we want the same thing, and that means that we have to make certain sacrifices for each other. I stay. You don’t touch the Agency. Doesn’t that sound fair?”

No, no, no, it doesn't, Chuuya wants to say. *It's not. None of this is fair.*

But Dazai presses his lips to his chin, to the line of his jaw, to his neck and the point where his pulse throbs, and every argument that Chuuya can think of wanes like wilted lilies under the heat of Dazai's attention; in the end, he is not wrong – he is right actually. They do want the same thing. They want each other, as trivial as it sounds in light of the powers that are at play here. They want things that only the two of them can give each other, and if the only thing that Chuuya must give up is killing some detectives, is that so unfeasible?

Dazai places the next kiss on his Adam's apple.

And another on his collarbone.

And –

Sighing, Chuuya rests his head against the wall.

And that is all it takes for Dazai to know that he has won once again.

"It will be fun. *I* will make it fun, I promise." He must want to demonstrate that claim right here now as he sinks to his knees in front of Chuuya without ever taking his eyes off him. "You have always enjoyed looking down at me, haven't you?"

Glaring back at him, Chuuya doesn't give him the satisfaction of being right.

After a moment, Dazai shrugs, taking his silence in stride. "That's okay. I'll do all the talking then – or, well, perhaps talking is not the wisest choice of words." He snickers to himself. "I will, however, use my mouth for other things."

His gaze flickers up to Chuuya before his mouth leans close to his crotch, slipping the zipper between his teeth, starting to drag it down.

Chuuya watches him as the oxygen in his lungs grows hotter and hotter with each second.

Dazai reaches the end of his zipper and –

A muffled crash from outside the bedroom makes both of them pause.

Chuuya frowns, straining to hear whether there is more, but when it's dead silent again, he curls his fingers in Dazai's hair and tugs gently but pointedly. "Probably just Jiji. Go on now."

“Jiji is right there,” Dazai tells him, nodding to the side. The cat isn’t on the bed anymore, slowly creeping toward the hallway leading to the office.

A moment later, there is another crash. Louder this time.

Okay, so something is definitely out there.

“Stay here,” Chuuya tells Dazai with a pointed gaze. For once, the man actually listens, staying put as Chuuya leaves the bedroom to investigate.

A thousand different possibilities swirl through his head. Dazai’s executives have finally had enough and are here to demand justice. That military division that Dazai mentioned has arrived earlier than expected. Or maybe Dostoevsky has somehow escaped.

None of that is the case though.

In fact, it takes Chuuya a minute to locate the source of the noise; the office looks the same as usual until –

Until he sees something dark and small and fast flutter in the periphery of his vision. First, Chuuya thinks that a bat has somehow found its way inside here – even though that makes no sense whatsoever – but it’s only when he catches a glimpse of the pillow in front of the fireplace that he realizes *that thing is not a bat.*

Because the egg – the one that idly sat on top of the pillow just hours before?

That egg is cracked.

And that thing –

“Holy mother of god,” he whispers, just as the thing – the dragon – Kafka launches itself at him.

Despite the abundance of hours that Chuuya spent chatting with the dragon egg, he still jerks back thanks to his survivor’s instincts. Not that it’s much help. Kafka still lands on his shoulder.

To be frank, he is a little, extremely, terrified to breathe, let alone move right now.

The creature that’s perched on his shoulder lets out an agitated, wild screech – that would probably sound haunting if it didn’t come from

something so tiny and young – and slowly, Chuuya's nerves start to melt.

"Kafka, hey," he mutters, trying to get a peek at it without getting his eyes clawed off; the animal that stares back at him is scaly and reptile-like… and it is also oddly cute. "You're okay. This is okay. Do you know who I am?"

The dragon peers at him for a long moment before cocking its head to the side.

Tentatively, Chuuya stretches out his arm. Miraculously, enough Kafka understands him, half-hopping, half-flying over to his hands.

Something warm and light sprouts within him; something that he hasn't felt in a long, long time.

He is holding an actual dragon in his hands.

"Chuuya? I'm coming out; you're taking too long."

He doesn't answer, too scared that it will frighten away that little thing in front of him.

Maybe not the wisest choice because a moment later, he hears a loud yelp come from behind him. Wings fluttering, Kafka hisses at the new arrival before flying away – or, well, attempting to anyway. It crashes into the wall right next to Dazai's head, who looks three seconds away from a heart attack, before ricocheting off it and slamming into the ceiling next –

Chuuya spins around to Dazai. *"Dragon."*

"I SEE THAT!" Dazai exclaims, flinching away every time Kafka comes near him. "HOW?!"

"Why are you asking me?! YOU bought the egg!"

"Yes! An EGG! THAT IS A DRAGON!"

"YOU WERE THE ONE WHO ALWAYS SAID THAT IT WOULDN'T BE THAT STRANGE –"

"I WAS JOKING!"

"WELL, GUESS WHAT? JOKE'S OVER BECAUSE THAT IS A REAL DRAGON!"

Dazai stares at him with wide, twitching eyes before his head jerks back again, Kafka aiming straight for his head –

“Say Kafka’s name!” Chuuya yells. “I think it knows its name!”

“KAFKA!” Lo and behold, the dragon cushions its landing – still ending up with its claws dug into Dazai’s collar, but the lack of blood is a good sign. “Heeey… Kafka,” he says again, rooted to spot as he blinks at the little creature that’s examining his face. “Don’t eat me, please.”

“Why would they eat you?” Chuuya mutters, making his way over to them.

“Because it’s a –” Dazai’s voice lowers into whisper-hiss, as if not to offend Kafka “*—DRAGON?”*

“But look at the size.”

“You’re small too and that doesn’t stop you.”

Huffing, Chuuya reaches over and grabs the baby dragon, which elicits a startled shriek from Dazai.

“What are you doing?!”

“Taking Kafka into my hands. What does it look like?” He shoots the man a look before lowering his eyes to the little dragon. “I think you don’t mind. Do you, Kafka?”

The response is a high-pitched hiss.

“Does that sound like *liking* to you?”

“It’s a dragon,” Chuuya mutters, though he does spread his palms so Kafka can use its own legs to move around. “That’s just how you creatures communicate. See? It’s just hopping around.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t know I was talking to the local dragon expert!”

“I’m just *guessing*.”

Dazai’s chest rises and falls heavily, smoothing the bewildered frown on his face into something a little kinder. “I know, I know. So… this is not something that I ever anticipated.”

That startles a laugh out of Chuuya. He watches Kafka make its way to

the desk again, managing to land on top of it this time, before he looks at Dazai. “I bet.” There is another shriek in the background. “Hey. We have a dragon.”

“We have a dragon,” Dazai repeats in a tone that is just as morbidly enchanted as his. They look at one another for a moment; then both burst into laughter. Dazai leans against the wall, and Chuuya leans against him, too light-headed with adrenaline to trust his legs right now.. This situation is so ridiculous that it feels like a fever dream. But Chuuya pinches himself and he doesn’t wake up.

“The question is,” Dazai says after his laughter fades, fingers gliding across the length of Chuuya’s back, “what we do with the dragon that we now have.”

Chuuya sends him a threatening scowl. “We obviously keep it.”

Dazai meets his gaze. “It’s a dragon. I don’t think they’re meant to be kept.”

“It’s a dragon in a world *without dragons.* We can’t just let it out into the world.”

“I know. That’s why I’m asking.”

“It’s not like we lack any money. We can, I don’t know, buy property where we can keep it?”

“And who is going to look after the dragon?”

Flashing Dazai a sweet smile, Chuuya pokes him in the chest. “You. Since you’re about to have lots of free time anyway.”

“Don’t you want me here?” Dazai asks with a small pout in his voice.

“I don’t want you *dead* or *vanished into thin air,* but you don’t have to be stuck to my side all the time. I’m not a toddler that needs to hold your hand the entire day.”

Dazai finds Chuuya’s hand in response and lifts it, interlacing their fingers. “You do like to hold it, though.”

“Doesn’t mean I need it to keep this organization running,” Chuuya says and deliberately squeezes said hand. Hard. “You bought the egg, so you take care of it. I mean, that is what you wanted, right? A farm with animals and shit?”

Dazai grunts under his breath. “And shit.”

“Until then, we can keep Kafka here.”

A crash comes from behind.

“Kafka just broke my lamp.”

“I’m sure it’s not that different from owning a cat.”

Another thump.

“That was my iPad…”

“Okay, a *puppy*.”

The next crash makes Chuuya turn around in time to see Kafka inspecting the inside of the wine cabinet, completely unfazed by the glass that its claws pierce.

He makes a face. “A really, really high-energy and destructive puppy.”

“My office will be ruined by the time we find a place for it – scratch that, it will be ruined by next morning!”

“Don’t be such a baby,” Chuuya mutters, patting Dazai’s chest. “You never cared about your material possessions anyway.”

Dazai whines a little before resting his temple against the back of Chuuya’s head. Despite their bickering, a smile lingers on Chuuya’s face – one that refuses to wane despite the stab of guilt that it sends through Chuuya’s heart.

It feels wrong to smile after everything that he has done. He can never undo what happened to the sheep that day, so the least he can do to repent is be miserable. If the sheep don’t get to ever live their lives because of him, he shouldn’t get to enjoy his either. It also feels wrong in light of the absurd, self-destructive plan that Dazai has shared with him. One that Chuuya still isn’t any keener on partaking in even though he agreed to it. The city, the mafia, the war… everything is a mess.

But just this once, the rays of faint hope warming his chest are just as stubborn as his sorrow because there is a living, breathing dragon jumping from wall to wall in the office, and if magic like this can exist in this world, then so can hope.

His smile doesn't falter.

"By the way," Chuuya says after a while, "I spoke to Dostoevsky."

When that elicits no reaction at all, he tilts his head up to catch a glimpse of Dazai's face – amused as their eyes meet. "I know."

Of course he does.

Still, Chuuya scowls. "You're not mad?" Chest tightening, he points at him. "Not that you have the right to be mad."

"That," Dazai says, pulling him back by interlacing their fingers, "yes."

"He claimed that you used the book to bring Oda back to life."

"Well, he lied."

"On purpose or because he doesn't know?"

Dazai's lips purse in thought. "Good question."

"Besides," Chuuya sighs, "even if I go along with that ridiculous plan of yours, that still leaves us – no, *me* with a fuck ton of problems that go by the name of the Bishop's Staff. Are you really planning to fuck off and leave me to deal with that?"

"Chuuya darling." Dazai offers him an aggravatingly brilliant smile. "According to Dostoevsky, who's behind the Bishop's Staff?"

Chuuya's eyes narrow. "You."

"So if I die…?"

"The organization should die with you," he concludes. Then he shakes his head. "It's not a certainty. We have Dostoevsky and that didn't deter them."

"It will have to, or his accusation of me being behind all of that will make him look suspicious."

"That's a lot of speculation."

"And when have my speculations ever been wrong?"

"Do you really want me to answer that?"

Dazai's grin fades into a grimace. "Okay, *aside* from that one time."

"It doesn't matter whether you're right or wrong," Chuuya mutters, rubbing his brow. "We can't just let them get away with all that they've done because Dostoevsky's performance is over – and we have to deal with him too." He shoots Dazai a questioning stare. "Can't I just kill him?"

"Not if you still want to find a solution for the Bishop's Staff." Chuuya opens his mouth to complain when Dazai continues. "Maybe after."

"After what?"

"See, I have this plan."

"Of course," Chuuya says dryly.

"It will be your first choice of action as the new boss," Dazai says with a dreamy gleam in his eyes. "Grand, spectacular, and ruthless. It will be perfect."

Chuuya just sighs and lets him ramble.

Chapter End Notes

Next upppp we have:
- an unofficial goodbye party
- the start of the beast timeline
- and a dance :)

Chapter 40: The Last Supper

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

„This is extremely morbid. I don't understand why you insist on doing this now."

"What do you mean?" Frowning, Dazai turns away from the rows of tables and to Chuuya, who is also wearing a scowl except that it is a hundred times less play-pretend and a hundred times more furious. There's no better time to party than before your death."

"Your *fake* death," Chuuya whisper-hisses in that secretive 'lower your damn voice' tone of his that he takes when this particular subject comes up.

"Yes, yes, same thing." Dazai waves his dutiful concern away. Even if the mafia servants that flit back and forth were to overhear them, they would not have the guts to connect the words to their proper context.

"It's *not* the same thing."

"Well, it's the same point that I'm making. I can't possibly throw a party *after* my fake-death, Chuuya." He snickers to himself. "That would be silly."

"Why throw one at all?" Chuuya continues to drill into him, following Dazai from table to table like a pissed-off-shadow. "We're in the middle of a war – that's not going all too great, might I add."

"It will once I'm out of the picture. Excuse me, hey." Dazai flags down the closest servant and motions toward the array of flowers with a flick of his hand. She – Tohru, her name tag says – scuttles to a stop with wide, quivering eyes that look like they are about to pop out of their sockets. "This is wrong. I requested *Lilies of the Valley,* not lilies. Convallaria Majalis. Fix it." She nods and bows deeply before him; once she is off, Dazai slides his gaze back to Chuuya, stroking his chin in thought. "Where were we?"

"At the fact that having a party now is fucking *weird*."

"It will be my last chance to be seen out and about for the next couple of years," Dazai says and tips his head to the side. "Don't you want me

to have that?"

Blue eyes narrow at him. "Stop playing me, asshole."

Dazai sighs. "Not everything I say is a manipulation tactic, love."

"Sure it isn't," Chuuya mutters, his words not more than a dry scoff.

Dazai doesn't blame him. Sometimes he doesn't know if the words he utters are honest or calculated either. For so long, he had no one to be truthful with and no reason to be, that lying became ingrained in him, like breathing and taking a shit every morning. Not a day goes by without one of these three happening.

So Chuuya isn't exactly in the wrong but neither is Dazai.

"Try to relax." He guides Chuuya through the Port Mafia's ballroom with a palm on his back, toward one of the many bars that are not manned yet. "Have some fun." Dazai steals one of the champagne bottles and pours Chuuya a glass before staring him down until he has no choice but to raise it to his lips and drink, a cobra dancing to a snake charmer's tune. Only that Dazai is just as hypnotized by him as the other way around. "Yes, like that. Wonderful."

Huffing, Chuuya sets down the champagne and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. If Kouyou were here to witness his lack of manners, her heart would tremble from disappointment. "I still have doubts," he says.

He braces his cheek with his palm. "Such as?"

"Such as people believing that I'd steal your seat like that. They won't. They know that I'm –" instead of saying what he means, Chuuya makes a vague hand gesture. "Y'know."

"I do not *know*. Come on, I'm not a mind-reader, Chuuya. You have to actually finish your sentences to communicate with me."

That earns him a reproachful glare because they both know that Dazai understands just fine. He just wants to hear him say it. It's more satisfying that way.

"Our people know that I care about you," Chuuya allows with a gruff exhale, turning his body away from him to stare off into the distance. "They won't blindly buy the story you want to sell them."

“Don’t take this as an insult –”

“Sure.”

“—but most of the time when we’re together, you glare at me like you’re fantasizing about killing me in your head.” Dazai smiles when Chuuya provides his argument with a live demonstration; his fingers raise to poke Chuuya’s forehead. “Like this.”

“Because you’re annoying, not because I actually want to see you dead,” Chuuya mutters. As if needing something other than Dazai to tear apart, he grabs a napkin and starts shredding it into a dozen frivolous pieces.

“No one knows that except you. Besides, I’m the boss. I made you marry me. You are basically obligated to tolerate me – even the rumors can be written off as me coercing you into my bed.”

Chuuya raises his brows. “There are rumors?”

“Of course there are rumors.”

“What kind of rumors?” Chuuya demands to know, chin raised, eyes narrowed, like a good little liar. It’s cute that he tries at all considering who he is dealing with. But maybe that is the point.

“Do you really want to hear?” Widening his eyes, Dazai mock-gasps. “Or do you just want to hear all the filthy details?” He leans down to whisper in the shell of Chuuya’s lovely ear as he settles his arms on each side of him, lovingly crowding him against the bar. “Do you want me to fuel those rumors? Take you here and now, in front of all these tiny, irrelevant people?”

“Shut up,” Chuuya chokes out even as his spine melts against Dazai’s chest, his ass rubbing against his groin. He swallows thickly. “Forget I asked.”

“I could never.” Dazai can barely contain the teasing grin that dances over his lips – so he doesn’t. He lets it sway in all its glory, lets Chuuya feel it in the feather-light kiss that he presses to his neck, a breath shy of that collar that he loves to wear. It will have to come off once he takes the office but Dazai will make sure that they will keep it for the bedroom. “The rumors are about you and me and all the sinful things we do to each other behind closed doors.”

Chuuya exhales a shuddering breath before he slides Dazai a brazen

glance his way. “Like the fact that you like my hands around your neck?”

Dazai pouts; then he dips his head and allows him this victory being the dutiful, supportive husband that he is. “Yes.” But he also wouldn’t be doing his job properly if he didn’t sprinkle in a dash of playful taunting. “Or the fact that you like your hair pulled, like this.” *Pull. Low gasp.* “And being edged until you cry.”

“*You* like torturing me,” Chuuya mutters half-heartedly, too busy arching in Dazai’s arms like a needy cat – all he has to do now to sell the role is start purring. “I tolerate it because I’m… nice like that.”

“Oh, that’s what you call yourself now? Nice?”

“I am nice.”

Lots of people are nice without having a sliver of kindness. Chuuya is the other way around. He has a moral compass – even if he tells himself he has lost it — but he is also rude and blunt and foul-mouthed. Dazai loves that about him. It warms his cold, dead heart until it tricks him into thinking he is alive.

“You’re a lot of things but nice is not one of them.”

Chuuya huffs but he doesn’t seem to be too affronted. “Whatever. Told ya to forget about it.”

Dazai hums and watches Chuuya turn in his trap until they are face to face again, a breath apart, yet the internal distance between them grows wider, much wider, Chuuya’s emotions spiriting him away somewhere Dazai can’t follow.

“Where are you running off to?” he asks, planting his fingers on Chuuya’s chin to tip it up so their eyes can reunite.

A belly-deep sigh brings them a touch closer. “Nothing that you say makes me feel any better about this ridiculous plan.” Chuuya flicks a hand at him. “I’ll either be a disloyal power-grabbing traitor, a liar, or the whore in your bed that decided to take a shot at the throne. Either way, people are not going to accept it.”

Reality says otherwise. Kouyou may like to tug and prod at Chuuya like he is her little puppet doll that she can play with and mold after her own image but she wouldn’t bother if she wasn’t already bewitched with him to begin with. His blunt kindness. His fascinating

mixture of bruteness and coyness. His steadfast loyalty, devotion and resilience. His spirit. Even the Colonel has taken a liking to Chuuya — one of the last people who have survived both the reign of Dazai's father, Mori, and now soon even Dazai himself before Chuuya takes over. That respect didn't simply fall into his lap. Chuuya had to prove himself over and over.

Dazai believes that Chuuya knows that. Or else he wouldn't have made such bold moves as defying Dazai's orders and visiting Dostoevsky. He had help, which means he also had people willing to betray Dazai and *that* means he has people whose loyalties lie wih him rather than with Dazai.

However, Chuuya is not exaggerating his concern – no, Dazai doubts that. Chuuya wouldn't do such a thing, not even for Dazai. It's something in-between, a secret third thing. It's not that Chuuya has so little confidence in himself. It's just that his dislike of the plan itself is stronger – his dislike of Dazai's voluntary abdication.

Chuuya will never be the soft-spoken romantic soul that Dazai has read about in novels but he needs not be. Every gesture, every insult, and every choice he makes speaks louder than a love confession.

Dazai's smile shrinks, though only because of how honest it is. He brushes his thumb over the dip above Chuuya's chin before lowering his hand. "We're not talking about high schoolers, Chuuya. We're talking about the Port Mafia. They know I wanted you for a reason. They know how capable you are."

"I thought you didn't want me for my power," Chuuya challenges softly, raising his brows as though to say 'Aha! Gotcha!' except, of course, they are both aware that it's only another light-hearted blow in their verbal sparring match. A jab for the sake of getting closer.

Dazai does step closer, linking his fingers around the back of Chuuya's neck like a locket. Click. Chuuya is only his to open. His to let go. "They're not *that* smart."

Chuuya's gaze drifts past him – perhaps to some servant passing by and seeing them like this – before it returns to Dazai. "And what about our friends?" he wants to know. The gentle breeze of his voice makes Dazai's heart clench viciously. So dreadfully alive.

"They will believe."

"They know that we're…" Shaking his head, Chuuya blinks, searching

for the right words again. In the end he settles on: “They know that this is real. The Flags, Kouyou, Yuan, Shirase. I can’t lie to them.”

“To keep them safe, you’ll have to,” Dazai says without bothering to adorn his request with silken lies and empty promises. Their plan will have to stay between the two of them only. No exceptions.

Chuuya lifts his arms to cross them over his chest. “Is that so?”

“It is very much so,” Dazai quips back with a simpering grin. “I want a proper vacation, and that will only work if the only people aware of my whereabouts are us two.” The tension that has embedded itself into Chuuya’s spine like a wire doesn’t stem from the need for confidentiality though. Dazai makes sure to meet those hardened eyes. “It will work and I will still be here. It will be okay.”

“You’ll only be there in the shadows. I won’t be able to talk to you or, I don’t know, hold your freaking hand in front of anyone *for years.*” Chuuya blows out an agitated breath, full of grief for a person that is right in front of him. “Can you understand why I don’t like the idea of that?”

But Dazai responds with a delighted smile. “Chuuya wants to hold my hand?”

“It was an example,” Chuuya shoots back. “A stupid one.”

“I like it though,” Dazai says, stealing his partner’s hand so he can interlace their fingers and feel his warmth, his flesh. And for a moment, that’s all they do. They hold hands. Chuuya tries very hard to look annoyed and unimpressed by the whole ordeal but he tightens his hold of Dazai when he thinks he is about to slip away from him.

“Chuuya, listen to me,” Dazai starts and catches his eyes, holding them. “This world is full of bewildering surprises. There is currently a dragon on the 33rd floor destroying all the furniture, and there are ghosts, and magical books that make wishes come true.” He cocks his head to the side. “Do you think that we won’t be able to find an excuse to bring me back every now and then?”

“Bring you back? Like…” Chuuya squints “… claim you’re some sort of ghost or what?”

“Maybe.” Dazai shrugs. “Or you can say that you’ve gone mad with grief, so you ordered a shapeshift-ability-user to pretend to be me to find closure.”

“That’s an awful idea. People will think I’m insane,” he says with a huff.

“Who cares? People say that about me all the time. I once heard that I haven’t slept since my ascension. In the end, you can always write it off as just another rumor and no one will be able to say something because you will be the boss and your word will be law.”

Chuuya rolls his eyes, squeezing Dazai’s hand – he does that a lot, squeezing Dazai like he is his personal little stress ball every time he downplays his emotions for the sake of nonchalance. “To be fair, you did survive off coke and naps before me.”

“To be fair, I’m still the boss, so I can do whatever I want.”

A moment of silence passes between them. Chuuya weighing what all this means and Dazai looking for more gaps in his faith to cement with assurances.

“What about corruption?” Chuuya asks after several moments. “My greatest weapon, and I won’t be able to use it anymore.”

“The greatest weapon in your arsenal –" Dazai reaches out to press the tips of his fingers to Chuuya’s forehead “– is you. And you’ll still be able to use corruption. Verlaine found a way without having a nullifier.”

“Yeah, and he became an *addict*,” Chuuya deadpans.

“Which you won’t have to be because you will have me. See? There is practically a solution for everything. Worry not, husband of mine. I have got your back.”

Chuuya gazes at him for a moment as though he isn’t sure whether to utter the thing on his mind and then he says, “And I have yours.”

“Heh. Always so serious.” The vibration that starts buzzing in Dazai’s pocket saves him from dealing with the flutter of his chest. After a quick look, he lets out a sigh. “Unfortunately, I also have an appointment with Gin. I have to talk to them about something.”

“About what?”

“Their rabid brother who recently joined the Agency and who will soon come to hunt Gin down.”

Well, Gin *and* Dazai, but semantics.

Chuuya blinks. “Oh.”

“I trust that you can take over the rest of the event planning in the meantime, yes?” Dazai says, already slithering away from Chuuya and his –

“You – I never agreed to this! I have better things to do!!!”

“Wonderful,” Dazai calls, waving a hand at Chuuya. “I’m so happy to hear that. Bye ~”

***

“Boss,” Gin says with a respectful bow of their head before taking a seat across from him.

“Gin darling, hello. How are the kids?”

“Fed and passed out.”

“Thank you again for looking after the little monstrosity while we figure out a way to…” Dazai raps his fingers against the glossy wood of his desk “… deal with her.”

Kafka hatched two weeks ago, yet they still do not know much about her. Not even her sex as neither of them know much about dragon anatomy. One day Chuuya called her a she and then it just stuck, so now Jiji has a girlfriend. It’s cute. After a fair amount of hissing and attacking, the cat eventually warmed to the dragon because a day later, Dazai found the two of them snuggled up on the bed. Kafka doesn’t spit any fire, nor has she grown all that much. Dazai suspects it’s because the dragon egg came from a world that is not theirs.

“Of course,” Gin replies, folding their hands in their lap. “You’re busy and I’m… here.”

Cradling his chin in his hand, Dazai tips his head to the side. “Tell me, do you like your job?”

“Huh?”

“Your job. As my secretary.” Dazai’s finger softly taps his lip. “I guess I’m not the easiest person to deal with, but the job. Do you enjoy it? Is it something to pass the time? Or do you spend your hours daydreaming of leaving one day?”

When Dazai first spoke to Gin, they had been little more than one street rat out of the thousands of other ones in Suribachi city, all skin and bones, dressed in faded rags, and carrying that glaring hunger in their eyes. Hunger for food, for dignity, for a better life. But unlike their brother, Gin could see past that ravenousness. Although they didn't speak much, they listened. The perfect little shadow that an organization like the Port Mafia needed. So Dazai offered them a trade: their services for food, dignity and a better life.

Gin didn't take long to give him an answer, a quiet but definite 'yes.'

Almost two years have passed, and here they are, wearing a suit that was tailored for them, clean, well fed, well paid, still not a person of many words but now with much more experience in the underworld.

Dazai looks at them and tries to find that hunger, see whether it still lingers or whether the Port Mafia has sated it. He is not sure what he sees though.

"Are you asking me as my boss or as a friend?"

"Speak freely, Gin. We've known each other long enough now to do that, no?"

They give them a nod in agreement before their lips part. The answer comes after another pensive pause. "It's not my passion, this job. Then again, whose job is?"

Dazai strokes his chin in contemplation. "It's not impossible. Rare but in the realm of doable things. You could pursue something that you like." Leaning back in his seat, he crosses his legs. "Didn't you say that you wanted to be a DJ once?"

"When I was twelve," Gin says flatly.

"Our childhood selves often know better what we want than our adult selves."

"You didn't let me finish."

"Oh," he says. "Go on then."

"It's not my passion but it is the closest thing to home. I have friends here. People that I go out with for drinks. People that I can have lunch with. I have somewhere to live. And something to wake up for. Something to fight for every day." Gin's eyes slide heavenward for a

second, then back to Dazai. “I have a place here. Out there, in the real world, I don’t belong. I never have.”

“Interesting.”

“What about you?”

Startled by this question, Dazai scrunches up his nose. “Me?”

A nod.

It’s a good question, he has to give them that.

Because what *is* there outside of the Port Mafia for Dazai? He was born into this organization and raised as a mafioso. The longest time he spent away from here was a whopping five months. That’s it. In the end, he came home. He always came home no matter how many times he ran away because a miserable life with structure was better than a miserable life with no purpose, no aim and no direction.

It's the reason that the last phase of his grand master plan was supposed to end with him dead. Once he finished with his work, there would be nothing here to hold him anymore. Better to be in the ground than adrift.

Then Chuuya happened though.

Dazai caught a glimpse of a life beyond the mafia and beyond the vast greyness of mundane life – of an epilogue of sorts, the part that people get to enjoy once they have overcome all their struggles. Verlaine and Rimbaud are living that life. It’s bashful, maybe even lackluster, but it’s something worth going to bed and waking up for – because he wouldn’t be doing it alone anymore. Chuuya would be in bed next to him, yawning against his neck and grumbling about needing another few hours. Chuuya would be there at the breakfast table. Chuuya would be there during the afternoon slump when life seems too tepid and lukewarm. Chuuya would be there at night, intertwining their bodies and moaning into his ear.

Maybe that is weak of Dazai – to change his perfect plan just for this one person.

Or maybe Dazai has replaced his purpose in life with a human being. Maybe their relationship is doomed to fail with how co-dependent they are.

Maybe, maybe, maybe; there are a lot of maybes.

But for once, Dazai has decided to kill his darlings, so the *maybe*s, they don't matter.

It's what comes after that does.

"I feel the same way," he finally says. "This is where I belong. This is my home." And then: "The reason I summoned you is your brother. He is looking for you."

Gin's eyelids flutter in surprise. "Ryunosuke," they say, touching their mouth. "He is looking for me?"

Dazai nods. "And once he finds out that you've been here this entire time, he'll come knocking at our door to eliminate the big bad wolf. Me. Now, you have a choice. You can stay. As you said, you have a place here. You will always have one. But you can leave if that is what you wish to do. Our contract – the things that I asked of you when I recruited, you fulfilled all of them. You owe me nothing."

"I didn't expect to hear that," Gin admits. "I thought…" They gulp down a breath. "I thought he had gotten himself killed."

"Well, almost, but he recently joined the Armed Detective Agency."

"Oh."

"So it's only a matter of time – " Not days but most likely hours even; after all, what better time is there to attack Dazai while he's facing an ambush from the Hunting Dogs? "— until he finds out that you're here. I will need a decision from you before sunset, so I can adjust my plans accordingly."

"Okay."

***

"Sit."

"I'm your bodyguard, I can't just s—"

"I said *sit*," Dazai hisses, forcing him down with a hand around Chuuya's wrist. "You used corruption less than sixteen hours ago."

Chuuya rolls his eyes. "I'm *fine.*"

He slept, fed himself and drank enough fucking fluids after corruption, so it's no reason to treat him any different now. The bodyguard of the Port Mafia boss should be on his feet, ready for anything, not lounging at the table, right?

According to Dazai, that's wrong.

"Good for you. Now be fine on the chair."

The celebrations started an hour ago and they span over the entire four floors of the main mafia tower, one for each rank. The lower-level folks are on the lowest level, though that doesn't make their food and their drinks any less expensive. Squad leaders, their units, and intelligence agents are a floor above. The upper echelons are even higher. Dazai, his executives, his inner circle – and by extension, Chuuya's – hold the highest floor. Their ballroom is not as grand but all the shinier; the staff that is fluttering around of highest esteem as are the delicacies on their table.

"Fuckass," Chuuya matters and crosses his arms, though he does remain seated so as to not attract any more attention than he already has. Everyone's busy chatting to their neighbor, the music loud enough to drown out the conversations from the other end, but this is the mafia's elite of the elite. They know how to pay attention without making it obvious.

"Is that a way to speak to your husband?" When Chuuya's head turns to him, Dazai is already looking at him, one arm draped over the back of his chair and wearing that insufferable 'I'm going to make you squirm by uttering the most outrageous think that comes to my mind' smirk.

Chuuya puffs out a breath. "Our marriage was just a formality, *fuckass."*

"Maybe we should do it for real then."

"Hah?" Chuuya stares at him in horrified surprise.

"Marrying, I mean," Dazai says as though that wasn't obvious.

"That's…" He feels so flustered by this proposal that his voice gives out on him as heat floods his neck. "… stupid."

The bastard's head tips to the side, curious. "Why?"

“Because,” Chuuya leans closer to him and lowers the volume of his voice so no one beside them will hear him. “Can’t marry a soon-to-be-dead man.”

“Once your time’s up, you will have to find a way to vanish too.”

Chuuya frowns back at him. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That you’ll be dead on paper too.” Dazai shares a conspirative smile with him. “We both will be.”

“And that’s a reason to marry?”

A nod. “It will be our new start. Just think about it.”

Before Chuuya can tell him that he will not waste his time fantasizing about something as unimportant as marriage, Dazai rises to his feet, glass of wine in his hand, and the low chatter around them cuts to an immediate halt.

“I would like to make a toast.” He lifts his glass. “To you. For giving your blood to the mafia and driving it forward day by day. The last couple of months have been rather unfortunate but, fear not, I have a plan, and soon, very soon, the Port Mafia will lay the Bishop’s Staff to rest and end its blight on the city once and for all.

“In fact –” His gaze slides to Chuuya like an arrow, but the glimmer in his eyes is a private, intimate thing shared only between the two of them “— today my husband and partner, executive Nakahara Chuuya has single-handedly defeated an entire unit of the Bishop’s Staff that intended to take down several of our most valuable shell companies to cripple our economy. Thanks to Chuuya, they accomplished no such thing.

“So, to all of you and to him.”

Chuuya resists the urge to pull his hat over his face to cover the heat that blooms on his cheeks when a dozen eyes fixate on him. Instead he wraps his fingers around his glass of wine and raises it into the air. Not for himself but for everyone else. The people who deserve to be remembered: the ones on the frontlines, the ones who died, and the ones who will die, just so all of these people will continue to live comfortably.

Albatross is the first to break the hushed silence that has descended over the table after Dazai has sat back down. “Cheers, man. I’d drink a

whole bottle of Vodka for you."

"You'd drink a whole bottle of Vodka just for fun," Piano Man remarks with an amused huff.

Not that it fazes Albatross or anyone else around him.

"I'd do it more gladly for Chuuya, though."

"Thanks, but this is really not worth mentioning," Chuuya says, staring at the dark liquid in his glass of wine. "We've all done things."

"It's not a crime to accept a compliment every once in a while, lad."

"Yeah, Kouyou-san, tell him."

Blowing out a breath, Chuuya shoots Albatross a look. "I'm just fucking saying."

"Boss, do something about that."

"Okay," Dazai says, and judging by everyone's expression, no one expected him to actually listen to that half-hearted demand. Neither did Chuuya, but that doesn't make him any more impressed either. "Chuuya, as your boss, I order you to accept the compliment."

His only response is to roll his eyes.

He is not going to accept any fucking compliments when they both know that it's part of Dazai's plan to paint him as some sort of hero, so that his ascension to the top will transpire smoothy. The truth is he is anything but that. Accepting the false praise would only make him a fraud on top of it all.

Fortunately, the conversations steer away from Chuuya and to other topics. The Bishop's Staff. Rumors that have been brewing lately – and that are tame enough to utter in the presence of the boss. ('Is Hirotsu going to retire soon?' – 'Was Higuchi spotted kissing someone dark-haired and tall a few days ago?' – 'Did Tachihara start a secret band in one of the unused meeting rooms?' – 'Is there going to be a new dress code for grunts soon? Because there should be!')

Chuuya listens with one ear but mostly spends his time picking at his food – good but too heavy for the fluttering nerves occupying his stomach – and sending glances to his side every now and then. Dazai has for once in his goddamn life cleared his plate and even though he

still doesn't make an effort to include himself in the conversations, he looks like he is listening; chin pillowed in his palm, face relaxed, and his one eye… intense as he watches his people eat, talk and drink. Like he is *savoring* this moment, memorizing every second of it, so he can lock it away inside his chest and revisit it later –

Once he will no longer be able to be here. With them.

Chuuya's heart clenches viciously inside him.

"How's the monster doing?" a voice suddenly asks, and blinking, he tilts his head to see Yuan looking at him from her seat between Albatross and Shion – one of Kouyou's girls and the third party in their… relationship – or whatever it is that they call themselves.

By monster, she means Kafka – Kafka, who has become a bit of a celebrity among their friends and co-workers. Nearly each and every person sitting at this table has paid Kafka a visit – mostly to see her with their own eyes, which makes sense because who the fuck would simply believe someone when hearing about a fucking dragon? But once they verified that Kafka is very much real and very much a dragon, albeit tiny and without any fire-spitting abilities, they all kept coming and coming, mostly to look and play with her.

Since Chuuya's jam-packed schedule rarely allows him enough time to be a proper and responsible pet dragon owner, he doesn't mind all the visitors. It makes everyone happy, but especially Kafka who has grown into a spoiled, flying lizard-cat thanks to her close alliance with Jiji.

"She's not a monster," Chuuya replies, oddly defensive over a nickname that's just a loving joke. "She's actually very well behaved, thank you very much."

Dazai lets out a soft snort next to him. "Love, she destroyed your bed."

"It's not like she knows that we need it for sleeping. She's a dragon."

"I still can't believe it," Yuan mutters into her hand, shaking her head.

Chuuya raises his brow. "Believe what?"

"That she's a dragon! How is that possible?"

"Are we sure she's not just a freak lizard?" Albatross asks into the round. "She looks like a lizard."

Across from him, Lippman narrows his eyes. “Darling, how many lizards with wings have you seen?”

“I said a freak lizard. Geez, it’s like you guys don’t even want to listen to me. I’m not as stupid as you make me out to be.”

When Shion pets the pout on his lips with the tips of her fingers, long lilac nails gleaming in the dim light of the room, a shudder crawls down Chuuya’s spine. His attention shifts to safer territories.

“I doubt that mutations this big are possible,” Piano Man says before taking a sip of his white wine.

A nudge to his side makes Chuuya tear his eyes away to glance to his side and at Dazai, who leans in and whispers, “I have this theory.”

“What theory?” he replies dutifully, already knowing that he is about to hear the most outlandish string of words in the world.

“Remember the ghosts?” Dazai asks and draws away enough to look at him, though he is still close enough that his smell surrounds Chuuya like a cloud of smoke.

He huffs. “How could I fucking forget an army of ghosts?”

“Well, I had our people look into it. Apparently, we’re not the only ones who had to deal with them recently. There were more than a thousand ghost sightings from all over the world in the last three months. Guess how many there were before.”

“Half as much?”

“None,” Dazai reveals, his tone low and mysterious. “Aside from the usual stuff. Folklore and all that.”

“So what does that have to do with Kafka?” Chuuya asks with a puzzled squint.

“I suspect that they both come from the same thing.” Dazai pauses. “No, let me rephrase. Not from the same thing but the same thing made it possible. *The Book.”*

Chuuya’s brows furrow. “What do you mean?”

“There are an infinite number of universes out there, right?” He waits for Chuuya to nod before carrying on. “Right. I… I don’t remember all of it but I know that not all of them are built like ours. Not all of them

have abilities. Some have no supernatural powers at all. Others do but they are different. It only makes sense if there were universes with dragons. And ones with ghosts… or for ghosts."

"But didn't you say the universes were separate? It's not possible to cross over from one to the other, right?"

"Not as far as I'm aware. My theory is that sometimes things slip through anyway."

Chuuya stares at him for a second. Then: "Yeah, you've lost me."

Turning around in his chair, Dazai flags down one of the waitresses and, for some reason, tells her to bring him a book.

"You're so fucking lazy," Chuuya mutters. "You could just get up and get it yourself."

Dazai just grins back at him. "Now where would be the fun in that, hm?"

A mere minute later, the waitress is already back, armed with a book and an ultra-polite smile. "Here you go, boss."

"Thank you very much." Wearing child-like excitement, Dazai turns to face him. Chuuya finds it unfairly adorable even though he has no idea where he is going with this. "So, imagine the infinite number of universes is this book. Each page represents one universe. Following?"

Frowning, Chuuya nods.

"Technically, there is no way to cross over, but. See this?" Dazai traces the binding of the book with his index finger. "This is the point that connects every universe. It's always the same no matter which universe you're in… at least, so I think. I also suspect that it's the place where the veil between our and other universes is the thinnest, so sometimes, things slip through."

"That's a very speculative theory," Chuuya tells him, not bothering to mask his skepticism.

"I know." Dazai offers him a shiny smile. "That's why I became the mafia boss, not a scientist."

It infects Chuuya with the sick urge to reach over, tug him down and kiss him. Since that is obviously not an acceptable thing to do, he

forces himself to focus on the very important, albeit strange, topic at hand. “So, Kafka is from another universe where dragons exist?”

“It’s possible, yes.”

“And so are the ghosts?”

“Yes.”

“But why now? The ghosts, I mean. If the veil has always existed, why would ghosts appear all of a sudden and not before that?” Before Chuuya receives an answer, he says, “Let me guess. You have another theory.”

Dazai’s laugh is shockingly genuine and loud, earning them several curious glances from his people. They both ignore them. “That’s because the more people know about the book, the flimsier this universe becomes. I believe it affects the veil as well.”

“Hah? So what, if people find out about it, the universe’s just going to collapse on itself?”

“Something like that, yes.”

“Dazai, what the fuck?”

“I know,” Dazai says, like they are talking about something as trivial as the closing of a mall, and not the literal end of their world. “It’s unfortunate.”

“*Unfortunate*, he says,” Chuuya whisper-scoffs, running a stressed hand through his hair. “Aren’t you worried?”

“Well, I was going to help out by making one person less know about it, but you made me promise to stay alive, so –”

“Dazai.”

“What?” Dazai murmurs, so close that his words wash over the shell of Chuuya’s ear, raising goosebumps all over his spine. “I’m telling the truth.”

“Do you have a plan to do something about it?”

“I’m working on it but for now, it’s too abstract of a problem to find a solution for. I can’t fix something that’s not happening yet.”

“You just said the veil is getting thinner.”

“I said it’s a theory,” Dazai corrects, eyes bright as he smacks his lips. “Maybe it’s something else.”

Chuuya has drunk enough wine not to suppress his noise of enchanted disbelief. “How do you know all this stuff anyway?” he asks wryly. “Is there, like, a manual on the first page or something?”

“Heh, no. I met the creator once, that’s all.”

“What?” he sputters.

A nod.”

“Isn’t that some sort of god? And you met them? Just like that?”

“I don’t think he would like to be called a god. He’s more of an…” Dazai strokes his chin in contemplation before matching Chuuya’s wide eyes with a wide smile. ”… author, yes.”

“So did that author tell you why he…” He’s not sure how to eloquently say ‘create a million of universes inside of a damn magical book’ so he simply settles on: “…all that?”

Dazai emits a soft snort. “No, he’s very fickle and private. I didn’t get to ask him much when we met.”

“So what *did* you talk about?”

“He just told me to be careful, not to write anything into it or tell anyone about it. That sort of stuff.” Dazai shrugs, so fucking casual about it. “Then he vanished and I never saw him again.”

His mouth presses shut then, eyes drifting behind Chuuya, and he can’t help but to follow the direction of his gaze.

Albatross is all of a sudden behind them, looking at both of them with this weird expression.

“What?” Chuuya snaps brusquely.

“Nothing,” Albatross says, continuing to smile creepily. A moment of silence passes between the three of them, and then: “I just like looking at you two together. It makes me happy.”

Chuuya jerks back – right into Dazai, whose one arm is draped around

Chuuya's chair, the other one casually resting on his thigh. Neither of them move though.

"You're so fucking weird," Chuuya mutters. "Don't you have two girlfriends to stare at?"

"They're not my girlfriends. It's casual." And suddenly, Albatross' arms around his neck – half-hugging him, half-choking him. "You're so tiny but *so* fierce."

"Let go before I crush your hands!!!"

"Ha ha, you wouldn't do that to your – AH, SHIT –" Albatross jumps away to clutch his hand when Chuuya gives him a taste of having his hands crushed by gravity. It makes some of the people laugh at the table, the liquor clearly beginning to set in. It also makes Dazai chuckle to himself, and that Chuuya, for some reason, can't ignore.

"What are you grinning at, huh?"

Unfazed, Dazai's smile only softens as he sits there across from him, resting his cheek in one hand. "You."

"So, you guys thinking about babies in the future?" Albatross asks.

The wine in Chuuya's throat gets stuck. He has to cough into his fist to get his bearings before he chokes out a frazzled, *"What?"*

"You know, you'll need heirs someday," Albatross explains, flapping his hand about. "Tiny, deadly mafia babies. It'd be really cute."

Yuan's brows furrow at that. "How would that work? Would they adopt children?"

"Or get a surrogate," Albatross says. "So it's a blood heir."

"So, it doesn't matter that the child technically would be biologically only one of theirs?"

"If it's Dazai's, no." Albatross makes a face then. "No offense, Chuuya. You know I adore you. But Dazai's blood is… you know… royal."

This choice of topic is ironic, truly, given what Dazai is planning to do the very next day. Chuuya would laugh about it if he didn't catch the far-away expression in Dazai's eye, like he is emotionally a thousand kilometers away – or, in the past.

“I’m too fucking young to have kids now – or ever,” he finally says. “They’re whiny and annoying –” He jerks his chin towards the friend in question who started talking about this. “– just like you, Albatross.”

“If havin’ fun from time to time means being a kid, then I don’t wanna be an adult.”

Chuuya only huffs as he brings his glass to his lips and downs the content in one go. Although he enjoys the way the wine runs down into his chest, warming him from the inside, it’s the way that Dazai’s gaze snaps back to the present but, more precisely, to him, that he is after.

“Planning to go somewhere after this?”

Helping himself to more wine, Chuuya shrugs coyly. “Depends on the offers.”

“Oh, so Chuuya has offers now?”

“I’m hotter than the motherfucking sun,” he says, meeting Dazai’s eye. “Isn’t that what you keep telling me when you fuck me?”

Dazai lifts his hand to Chuuya’s face but he stops shy of his mouth, hovering his thumb there, probably on fucking purpose just to make Chuuya’s heart drum louder. After a considerable pause, Dazai finally uses his thumb to wipe the corner of Chuuya’s lip. “You like hearing it,” he softly says without taking his hand away.

“So what,” Chuuya retorts, voice full of hot air, “you’re lying?”

“Never.”

Liar.

And still, Chuuya can’t bring himself to care.

“I *have* offers.” After a moment of wired tension, he brings the conversation back to the initial topic. “A lot of people would kill to have a piece of the right hand of the boss.”

Dazai’s finger travels lower, tracing the curve of his chin, the line of his neck, and stopping to tug at his choker. “But would they die for it?”

“You tell me,” Chuuya mutters lowly mainly to say anything at all as he is too hyper-aware of the weight of Dazai’s hand around his neck to

string together something witty.

“I’ll kill them either way,” Dazai says after a moment, peeling the layers of clothes on Chuuya away with his eye alone, “so it doesn’t matter.”

Chuuya opens his mouth – and closes it again, gulps down a dry breath, then tries again. “The whole alpha-macho-male-act doesn’t really suit you, Osamu.”

“You’re right,” Dazai chirps back to his surprise, and presses the tip of his finger under Chuuya’s chin, forcing it up, up, up. “It looks better on you, so… “ He brings his mouth to Chuuya’s ear. “I should be the one offering someone else a place in my bed tonight. That’s what you’re saying, right?”

This is a game. A game that *he* started – to distract Dazai from his thoughts, but one that he began nonetheless.

And still, even the mere thought of someone else occupying the space in Dazai’s bed that belongs to *Chuuya* makes his blood simmer. It’s wrong. Not only that but it’s also ridiculous. No one else would be able to keep up with Dazai’s mind games – nor should they have to.

But admitting that he hates the idea of Dazai with somebody else – even if Dazai surely is well aware of it anyway – is out of the question, so Chuuya forces out a tight smile and even tighter nod. “Sure, go ahead. Pick someone else. I’d *love* to see it.”

“Who says you’ll get to watch?” Dazai asks, his grin growing wider, sharper.

“I’m just saving you the effort of picturing me as you fuck someone else,” Chuuya whisper-snaps.

“Chuuya…”

He growls out a low noise. *“What?”*

“Kiss me,” Dazai repeats, his hand tensing around the back of Chuuya’s neck. He actually looks like he means it, like it isn’t just another one of his stupid jokes –

Because he does, in fact, mean it, Chuuya realizes with a bolt of heated panic rushing down his spine. Dazai wants to fucking kiss him. Here. In front of all his people. Which is, obviously, insane. They can’t

do that. It's inappropriate. Although there are plenty of rumors already going around, they're not supposed to *confirm* them — and yet.

Maybe if Chuuya indulges Dazai on his whims, it will, somehow, by some miracle, cross Dazai's plans, and no one will believe that he is dead, and Dazai will have no choice but to return, and everything will stay just as it is.

It's a stupid, naïve part of Chuuya, but it is also an incredibly loud one. Louder than the rush of his blood in his ears, his pulse and the noises of all the people around him.

He stops struggling against Dazai's grip, allowing him to drag him even closer.

"You're crazy," Chuuya says breathlessly.

"Kiss me," Dazai whispers back, so close that Chuuya feels the phantom brush of his lips against him, "or I'll kiss you and I won't let you go so easily."

Chuuya curls his fingers into fists; then he raises his chin, and, ultimately, his eyes. "Kiss me yourself, you coward."

And so, Dazai does.

***

"What is he doing now?"

Shrugging, Yuan picks the piece of bread in her hands apart. "Mostly, he hangs around on the streets, performing odd jobs here and there," she answers Shion's question regarding Shirase.

"He should just join us already," Albatross says and slams his glass on the table a little too loudly, sloshing Vodka everywhere.

Yuan is about to go into the details of why he cannot simply 'join the Port Mafia' after everything that has happened in the last half year when the sudden movement at the head of the table catches her attention.

In particular, the boss falling over Chuuya, practically devouring him in front of the entire table.

She freezes. So does everyone else. Don't get her wrong, their

relationship is nothing new to her, but *actually* witnessing such a display, right in front of her eyes, is a different matter entirely.

Dazai cupping Chuuya's face with both of his hands, and Chuuya – solid as a mountain, stubborn, defiant and proud Chuuya – *melts* between his palms like liquid.

A part of her feels perverse for looking. Chuuya has *never* let himself act like this. With anyone. Certainly not the Sheep, not even when he was fooling around with De Luca. Yuan assumed he was just like the rest of the boys, allergic to showing emotions and all that crap, so imagine how surprised she was to see him break down in Osaka, and realize that, of all the people, it was Dazai Osamu, the boss of the Port Mafia, that got to take off Chuuya's armor and see who's underneath.

It makes sense, she figures, considering the macabre history that they share.

Another part of her resents Chuuya for still being able to love someone this much.

Because Yuan can't. She doesn't want to either. She won't be able to bear it, to lose them eventually. Not again.

It's not fair, she knows that. What happened to the sheep wasn't Chuuya's fault. Not really. It was that thing inside him, the ability or singularity or whatever. But at least, he still has Dazai and a heart to give to people.

Yuan glances to her side, and shares a pointed look with Albatross.

Her heart, on the other hand…

It's just not there anymore.

She can sleep with Albatross and Shion, on her other side, just fine. She can talk to them and hang out with them and get drunk with them – but the moment she feels any of them get too close, she flinches away again, back to a safer distance.

And she can't see herself allow them any closer any time soon either.

***

Piano Man is in the middle of discussing his next date with Lippman when he elbows him in the ribs, gentle but pointed, nudging him in

the direction of the head of the table where none other than the boss himself and Chuuya are lip-locked.

Piano Man can't help but clutch a hand to his chest. "How sweet."

"Darling, that's not sweet," Lippman says, raising his glass to his lips with a leering grin," that's foreplay."

***

How interesting, Kouyou thinks as she sweeps her gaze over the boss and Nakahara Chuuya – his husband, his executive, his bodyguard, his underboss all in one package – once before steering it elsewhere and dabbing the corners of her mouth with a napkin and delicate fingers. *And how unseemly.*

She vividly remembers the lad promising her that he would pick one role to perform in front of the Port Mafia and no more than that. But it is clear that something is brewing in the air in this very room. It has been growing since their failed attempt to use Oda Sakunosuke as hostage fodder against the Armed Detective Agency.

The few short weeks that Kouyou had Chuuya's ear and, therefore, the boss' ear are over, and everyone but them has been pushed to the outside again. It is not ideal but politics in the Port Mafia rarely ever are.

She raises her glass of wine to her mouth, as bright and as red as the color painting her smile, and takes a sip.

That is what makes playing this game so *fun.*

**

Chuuya struggles to look anyone in the eye for the next thirty minutes, which makes Dazai's blasé attitude all the more infuriating. It's simply not *fair* to kiss someone like that – in front of an audience, no less – and rouse the slumbering heat in the pit of his stomach only to return to drinks and conversations a minute later with a face full of smiles.

The bottle of wine helps a little. Not with the heat – that only gets worse with each sip, but with the embarrassment.

What also helps is the unspoken decision of everyone else to play along with Dazai's 'there is nothing to gawk at' nonchalance.

The combination of the Petrus and the casual indifference around him soon replaces the flustered pink on Chuuya's neck with a drunken glaze. In what feels like forever, his spine relaxes and he lets go. Even if it's just for one night – the last one for a while.

***

Hours pass, but somehow no one runs out of things to speak and drink about, and even though Chuuya can feel Dazai's exhaustion dim his mood like a persistent shadow, the man never attempts to leave this celebration early, determined to outlast every single person at the table.

Eventually though, one by one, people start to bid their goodnights as though everyone present wordlessly understands that it would be impolite to keep the boss glued to his seat longer than necessary. Chuuya watches, fascinated and horrified alike, how seamlessly this machinery operates. Dazai's rule may not be flawless but it *is* good. It works. And it took years, an entire lifetime of being here in the Port Mafia, to create the bond that he shares with his people.

Chuuya doesn't understand how Dazai is able to simply let go of it.

He doesn't understand how and why he is ever supposed to come close to it either.

***

The flags and Yuan hang around for another hour after the last people leave, everyone's alcohol levels and lack of sleep mixing into several rather honest conversations. But eventually, even they rise to their feet, and once they disappear out of sight, silence engulfs them, the room suddenly appearing ten times grander without all its people. Lonelier too.

Moments ago, there were still some servants fluttering about, cleaning away the last of the dishes, but now even they seem to have vanished. Perhaps they don't want to intrude. Perhaps they are tired. Chuuya is too.

He stretches his arms over his head and yawns before resting his head on Dazai's shoulder. "Ready for bed?" he mumbles, pinching himself to keep his eyes open.

"Not yet," Dazai says and rises to his feet in one fluid motion. Chuuya's confusion grows even bigger when a hand stretches out to

him. “Dance with me.”

“Hah?”

“Dance with me,” Dazai repeats without an ounce of hesitation – on the opposite, he looks amused by Chuuya’s startled apprehension. “You do know what that is, right?”

Chuuya narrows his eyes in reply. “Obviously. I just – why –” His words get cut off by an undignified noise when Dazai yanks him up and against his chest before steadying him with two firm hands around his waist.

“There’s no music,” Chuuya points out, fingers curled in Dazai’s shirt.

“Shibuya-kun.” Dazai lifts his head to the ceiling as though talking to someone there. “Give us some music.”

A moment later, a song starts playing, soft and melodic. Chuuya furiously frowns at the man.

“Who is Shibuya?!”

“Part of the security detail working in the surveillance room.” Dazai speaks like it’s common knowledge. It is not. Each new word fuels the flames of Chuuya's concern. There is still so much that he doesn’t know about the Port Mafia; and even though Dazai will still be there to help out behind the scenes, he won’t be there all the time – neither of them want that. “You have your music. You have a partner. So, will you finally dance with me or do I have to go on my knees and beg?”

Chuuya rolls his eyes but after another tight breath, he finally slides his arms around Dazai’s neck. “This is silly.”

“You think everything I do is silly.”

“Because everything you do *is* silly.”

With a carefree smile, Dazai tugs him even closer and spins them in useless circles. “I just want to take this in for another minute.”

“You do know that you are not actually dying, right?”

Dazai’s chest shakes with his soft laughter. “What’s death anyway these days?” A shrug. “If ghosts exist, does dying even mean something? And if everyone thinks you’re dead, how can you be alive still?”

Chuuya looks at Dazai. A vicious flash of hope makes his heart throb.

“Does that mean that you’ve finally realized how dumb your plan is?”

Dazai meets his gaze and Chuuya knows the answer to that question without needing to hear his words. “No. I’m merely…” He pauses. “Knowing what we know about the Book – it makes you wonder. Does it not?”

“I guess,” Chuuya says even though he hasn’t wondered about the meaning of death even once since he found out about the Book. He could. But he sees no point in wondering about what ifs and hypotheticals when the only thing that matters is what is right in front of him. The book may have a million worlds with a million different Chuuyas and Dazais hidden inside of it, but what is Chuuya supposed to do about them? What *can* he do? Nothing. So why waste his time? Far easier to pretend that the Book is just that: a book. A story. A fairytale. Something to think about when it’s late at night and you can’t fall asleep, not when you are wide awake.

“Of course Chuuya doesn’t care,” Dazai says then with an amused smile that softens the edge of his words. “Ever the realist.”

“It’s not that I don’t care. I just don’t see the point in it, is all.” He shrugs. “Why does it matter what death means? I only need you to be alive. That’s it.”

A bright eye gazes back at Chuuya. “But aren’t you curious? About the other universes?”

“No.”

Dazai raises his brows.

Chuuya rolls his eyes.

“Not even a little?” Dazai asks in that infuriating and teasing tone of his. Chuuya only tolerates it because, a heartbeat later, warm lips press to his jawline. Then his neck. “Just a tiny, little bit?”

It takes him a moment to string together words, the mouth on him frazzling his cognitive thinking. “Seeing…” He gulps down a breath, and sighs, sagging against Dazai’s chest. “Seeing how much that knowledge weighs you down has evaporated any curiosity I may have had once.” Chuuya tightens his grip around his neck. “I’m better off not knowing.”

Dazai goes still around him in surprise. Chuuya feels his gaze on the side of his head but he pointedly avoids it.

“It’s not the content of what I remember, you know,” he says a moment later. “It’s the amount of it. The fact that I remember at all.”

“So every other universe out there is all rainbow and sunshine?” Chuuya asks skeptically.

“Well, no,” Dazai admits, somewhat sheepishly, “but it’s surprisingly… okay.”

Now Chuuya is the one staing at him in disbelief. “Really?”

“Really.” And when he remains unconvinced, Dazai’s face breaks into a blinding grin before he pokes Chuuya’s nose – with his own nose. How silly. “Don’t look so aghast, Chuuya. Most of the time, we make it and are actually happy. Even if the world is horrible.”

“Most of the time,” he echoes, though he isn’t sure if he is making a point or asking a question.

Dazai’s smile dims a little. “Yeah. Most of the time.”

That gives Chuuya the response he was looking for. “Why would I be curious about that?” he mutters, leaning his chin on Dazai’s shoulder. “I’m trying to somehow make it here. I don’t have the time to worry about the infinite other Chuuyas out there.”

“I could tell you about the ones that do.” His voice has a strange pitch that Chuuya can't pinpoint. He smiles and Chuuya can feel the wave of whatever emotion that passes through him, crawling into his own chest.

“Well, I don’t want you to.”

“Okay,” Dazai says and brushes his fingers down the length of his arm. “Then I’m not going to.”

He sounds disappointed, Chuuya notes, and then understanding sinks in. Dazai *wanted* him to say yes, wanted to tell him about it. Of course he did. Living with all that knowledge without being able to tell anyone must be a weight on his shoulders that Dazai has been waiting to be relieved of for a very long time.

Chuuya waits a moment before he clears his throat. “Fine, I lied,” he

lies. “I want to know. Tell me.”

Dazai pulls back at that. His brows raise as they always do when he scans someone’s faces for deception. “Really?”

“Really,” Chuuya bites back, avoiding his eyes. “I still think it’s useless in the grand scheme of things, don’t get me wrong, but… I wonder. Sometimes.”

Under the mask of flailing discomfort sits the naked truth; he has no doubt that Dazai recognizes it for what it is, but maybe it’s because of that, that he chooses not to acknowledge it.

Moonlit, Dazai visibly ponders what to say next, gaze drifting to a place far, far away but his feet never stop swaying them back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, a dance with no rhythm but a dance with *purpose*. “In one of the universes,” he says eventually, “you like to dance.”

This startles a laugh out of him. “Me?”

Dazai nods too vigorously for it to be a lie. “Ballet.”

“Hah?” Chuuya narrows his eyes. “No fucking way. You’re bullshitting me.”

“I promise you, I am not,” Dazai murmurs, his voice carrying so much weight that it eclipses all of Chuuya’s doubts. “And you’re good at it. *The best.”*

“What about you?”

“I own a bar. Well –” Dazai’s brows knit together like he’s trying to sort his memories into the right order. “— I think that’s after we meet. Before you, I am in college. Studying economics or something dull like that.”

“What, no mafia?” Chuuya asks with a scoff.

“No mafia,” Dazai confirms. “No powers.”

Chuuya’s body clenches and unclenches again; he blinks as he digests this information. “Huh. No powers but it’s still inside the book. That’s weird, isn’t it?” It makes their universe sound like a simulation. A puppet play.

“Maybe to us but not to them. To them, it’s probably even safer that

way.”

Right.

His eyes slide to Dazai’s face, studying it. Chuuya has become so used to him that he sometimes forgets who exactly the man is that he shares his bed with. Not the power that he wields, forget about that, but the infinitesimal secrets that his heart holds, like the fact that he is a little scared of dogs, that he paints really well, or that he hums to himself when he’s doing paperwork — the ones that make him human. There is still so much history to him that Chuuya has yet to sink his teeth into. Intimate knowledge that he wants to devour until his blood no longer feels so empty.

He doesn’t care about the other universes. He cares about knowing this Dazai.

Noticing Chuuya’s rapt attention on him, Dazai slightly raises his brows, asking a silent question.

“Tell me about another one.”

“With or without powers?”

Chuuya shrugs.

“Okay.” Dazai touches his hand and spins him around before speaking. “In another one you’re a mafia executive and I’m just a college student. We meet because I drunk-break into your apartment one night.”

“You have to be making these up,” Chuuya mutters dryly.

“Cross my heart and hope to die, I am not.”

“Fine.” Chuuya still can’t help but roll his eyes. Real or not, it sounds very corny. “So what do you study in that universe?”

“Literature.”

It earns Dazai a scoff.

“What’s so funny? I like reading.”

“I thought you liked painting.”

“Can’t I like both? I’m a human being, not a one dimensional

character."

"Well, you *are* in a book…"

Dazai squeezes his fingers; his head tips to the side. "Does this not feel real to you?"

Chuuya stubbornly tares back at him. Of course it feels real. Every heartbeat, every smile, every kiss and every wound – all of it. How could it not? Dazai knows this because he was the one who held Chuuya when the news of the sheeps' death threatened to slice him in half. He was also the one kissing Chuuya, hear him moan into his mouth and shake around him from wild rapture every time they fucked.

It is real, all of it.

"Or this?" Dazai brushes his lips over his jaw, making his skin twitch. "Does it feel false?"

Chuuya doesn't need any convincing but that doesn't stop him from seeking out Dazai's mouth and guiding him into a kiss anyway. If none of this is real – just a puppet play or a pre-determined script – then so be fucking it because it feels fucking good. It feels fantastic – the way Dazai kisses him back, softly, letting Chuuya set the pace of their dance. Chuuya could do this for the rest of his days, feel just how real all of this is – how real Dazai feels under his touch, full of hot blood and fervor and life, his heart pulsing, his chest hard, his fingers bruising as they grip Chuuya's face.

When they break away to breathe, Chuuya keeps his eyes shut. His pulse is throbbing, coming alive inside of him, but his limbs are heavy with exhaustion from the day.

"Bed?" Dazai asks him, still somehow swinging them in circles.

Chuuya hums in reply. "Take me to bed, *boss."*

Dazai's laughter washes over his ear, warm and full of genuine delight. "Chuuya calling me boss and asking me to take him somewhere?" He draws away from him, grinning from ear to ear, but not without taking his hand into his. "Now *that's* unheard of."

"Don't get used to it. I just figured I could be nice on your last official day as the boss."

“What are you going to call me after my abdication?”

“Jobless sleaze.”

Dazai mock-gasps just as the elevator doors slide open and welcome them inside. “Rude!”

“But true,” Chuuya retorts with a dry scowl.

“I refuse to accept that. Pick something else.”

His brows furrow even harder. “Zombie man.”

Dazai actually rolls his eyes. “Boring.”

“Demon… king.” Chuuya makes a face before Dazai can. “Never mind. How about ‘Chuuya’s little bitch’?”

“Now that,” Dazai says, dragging out each syllable so that words as innocent as these still sound lewd coming from him, “is something I can get used to.”

“Oh yeah?” Chuuya raises his brows and tugs at the bandages around his hand, unraveling him.

Two dark eyes glint back at him. “But of course. It sounds fun, no?”

It does. But he is not about to admit that to the bastard because that would mean he likes Dazai’s plan – he doesn’t. Even though it’s all but inevitable at this point. Chuuya will never like it. He can’t. Not really.

The elevator comes to a stop on the 33rd floor.

“That’s our stop,” Chuuya murmurs.

Dazai’s office. His bedroom. Their bed. *Home.*

During the entire ride, Dazai hasn’t let go of Chuuya’s hand – he still doesn’t even as they stroll along the dim-lit hallway where his security detail waits for him, stoic and blank-faced.

Chuuya doesn’t know whether Dazai’s exhibitionist whims today are part of yet another plan or whether they are a just liberty that he is taking on the last night of his reign. To be honest, Chuuya doesn’t care that much either. He likes holding Dazai’s hand. He likes that people look at them, together or apart, and know that they belong together. Even kissing Dazai in public – as embarrassed as it makes him feel, it’s

still *good*. Satisfying. Fuck, it's exhilarating. So no, Chuuya isn't about to change Dazai's mind about all of this.

His office upon entering is silent as a tomb; not even the lights that flicker on help to dismantle the oppressive darkness blanketing the air. It's as though the room knows what is about to happen to its owner. As though it is already grieving – grieving for someone who is still here.

Chuuya can relate.

And yet, this darkness is familiar by now. Even comforting in an odd sense of way. Perhaps Dazai was right all these months ago, when he told Chuuya that he was meant to be here, blooming in the dark along with him. Although he is no flower, he has come to realize that he does thrive here.

Dazai only lets go of his hand when they are inside the bedroom and that's only because he flops down onto his back. Chuuya watches the fall and rise of his chest for a few moments before he kicks off his shoes, pulls off Dazai's as well, and finally climbs onto the bed — well, onto Dazai. His hips.

"Give me a moment," Dazai murmurs, followed by a yawn that he smothers with one hand, the other lifting to Chuuya's thigh, giving him a squeeze.

Chuuya ignores him. On any other occasion, his blood would be already simmering with mounting want. After all, why even share a bed if not to fuck? It's the disguise that they have been using for almost their entire relationship. They spend so much time together because they fulfill each other's needs. No other reason.

But right now, Chuuya just wants to sit still and do nothing except savor the moment until it's etched into the forefront of his mind. Not even his ability can manipulate the weight of his exhaustion.

So, after another moment, he lets out a sigh and slowly, cautiously, leans his upper body down until his cheek is resting against Dazai's shoulder. The breath he hears sounds surprised but not opposed. It gives him the courage to stretch out his legs as well, throwing one over Dazai's hip, tangling the other with Dazai's.

It feels nice to lie here, swaddled in the heat and comfort of another body. So much that it almost tastes like a sin too.

“Thank you, Chuuya,” Dazai says a dozen dizzying heartbeats later.

Chuuya barely even has the wits to roll his eyes. “’m not doing this for you.”

“I know.”

It will take him weeks to realize what Dazai meant by that.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for 5000 kudos!!!! That number is so insane that I can't even think about it lol but know that I appreciate every single one, just as I appreciate every comment, every bookmark, every question that I get sent on cc etc. <3

Next up we have:
- a morning
- a battle
- a song

Chapter 41: Swan Song

Chapter Notes

> Trigger Warnings are in the End Notes. Please proceed CAUTIOUSLY

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The call comes when the sun begins to set the next day.

And even though Chuuya has spent the last twenty-four hours swaddled in Dazai's heat, his fingers still tighten in the bedsheets, craving this peace to last just a heartbeat longer.

"Would you look at that," Dazai murmurs and rolls around to face him with a pleased smile. "I've made Chuuya lazy."

Not even this pompous lie is enough to make him want to face the music of the performance that they are about to put on. He shakes his head; whines a little. "I'm still recovering from corruption. Let's do this another day."

That makes Dazai laugh. Loudly.

Chuuya finally lifts his head but only to scowl at him. "What's so funny?"

"You're a terrible liar," Dazai tells him, his grin not nearly as mean as his words, especially as he plants a kiss on Chuuya's forehead. "It's cute."

"It's a liability too," Chuuya says as he watches Dazai slide out of bed – out of their little sanctuary. "No one will believe me when I tell them that you're dead and I'm the new boss. Everyone will see right through it."

"Don't worry," with his back turned to him, Dazai waves a hand through the air, "there will be so much to do, that you'll barely have to say a word."

Right. There will be a funeral. An ascension ceremony. A thousand meetings with executives, shell companies, other mafia clans and organizations. The thought alone makes Chuuya's head hurt.

Then Dazai spins around to him and somehow the pain in his skull softens. After all, Dazai will be there the entire time to guide him along. Isn't a little bureaucracy worth it if it means that he will stay safe and sound, *content*, for the first time in his life?

"Come on," Dazai says. "I'll help you get dressed."

Chuuya doesn't need his help. Has never needed it but he accepts it regardless. He'll never admit it out loud but he likes it: Dazai sinking to his knees to help Chuuya step into his pants, his eyes bright and intense, fixed on him like he is the single most important thing in the universe – like there isn't a war waiting for him outside this room. He likes the way Dazai's fingers adjust the holster to fit his thigh, the way his hands roam over his leg and ensure everything is secure. He likes the dip of his stomach when Dazai rises back to his full height and Chuuya has to drag his gaze all the way up to look at him. He likes the self-indulgent smile on Dazai's face as he takes his sweet time to button up Chuuya's shirt. He even likes the kiss that gets pressed to his mouth at the end – too sweet, too chaste, just like the last rays of the sun that graze the room, leaving him wanting more.

"I want to discuss something," Dazai says, readjusting the collar of Chuuya's shirt even though he has already done so several times. His gaze focuses somewhere on Chuuya's face, so close to his eyes that it would look like actual eye contact to anyone else. Chuuya is not just anyone though. He knows better. "And I want you to not get angry with me."

Chuuya blows out a breath. "I'll get angry anyway, so spit it out already."

For a fleeting moment, Dazai pauses and gazes into his eyes. "If anything happens to me –"

Yeah, he was right. Chuuya does not like this.

"Shut up," he snaps before he has to hear another word, shoving Dazai's hands away, though not letting go of them either. "Nothing is happening to you. This is all one big performance, remember?"

"Of course, but –"

"But nothing," Chuuya cuts in. "I wouldn't be doing my job if anything actually happened to you, and I'm fucking *good* at my job, so. Shut up. I don't want to hear it."

Dazai lingers in the silence that follows, his expression so genuinely stunned that Chuuya is about to start yelling all over again. But the moment doesn't last forever. It can't. A second later, Dazai lets out a breath and ducks his head, giving in.

"As my husband wishes."

Heat blooms on Chuuya's cheeks and forces him to tear his eyes away, pretending to look for something. "Where are my…" He blinks furiously. "… gloves?"

Unceremoniously, Dazai gives his ass a slap. "Right here."

"Thanks," Chuuya grunts out and slides his hands into his back pockets just to make sure that Dazai didn't simply want an excuse to fondle him – he didn't. The gloves are there.

"Now there is only one thing missing."

Distracted, Chuuya wiggles his fingers – now gloved. "Huh?"

"This," Dazai says, awfully close all of a sudden before he directs him to the mirror on the other side of the room. "It's about time. Don't you agree?"

Chuuya's eyes rise to see his reflection – Dazai close behind him as he slides a mafia-red scarf around his neck. The color perfectly matches his button-up – like it was supposed to from the very beginning.

This was the plan all along.

"It looks good on you," Dazai whispers, his breath hot, the tips of his fingers slow as they trail over the scarf, reverent. "Perfect. You were born to lead."

Chuuya stares at the man in the mirror. "I was born an experiment." A monster. An abomination. A weapon. Some would even say a mistake. Not a leader though.

"You were born a god." Dazai's eyes meet his reflection, devouring him "And you do not tame gods. You worship them and pray they have enough mercy not to smite you."

Chuuya's pulse throbs under his skin. Is Dazai stroking his ego to make sure that he is totally on board with the plan and not backing out at the last minute? Yes. Does that make his words any less

arousing? No.

At least right now.

Once Chuuya takes a few deep breaths to clear the fog of arousal clouding his brain, it's easier to examine this picture that they paint from an objective distance. "Won't this seem premature?" he wonders, touching the scarf. "You're not fake-dead yet. There cannot be two bosses at the same time."

"The timing's just right, trust me." Dazai gives him one last once-over before he saunters away to shrug into his own shirt. "It will solidify you as my successor."

Just trust me. It's what he always says, but it's hard to trust someone and agree to go along with a plan like this.

One of these days, Chuuya will no longer be able to do these kinds of trust falls anymore. Today though – today, he has no other choice.

It's his turn to help Dazai dress and he does so just as gladly, enjoying the quiet intimacy as they add layer after layer to Dazai's body. The bandages were never about hiding his scars, Chuuya thinks when he finishes wrapping his neck in gauze. Dazai doesn't care enough to be insecure. It has always been about protection. Armor. If no one knows who he is, they can't hurt him. They can try but it's as pointless as stabbing water.

The thing about these layers, though, is that they not only keep Dazai safe but isolated. No one can hurt him, nor can they see him. Or touch him. Love him.

He is just a ghost.

Dazai's decision to fake his death and live in the shadows might seem like the ultimate sacrifice: dead to the world, dead to oneself, but Chuuya suspects that it's the opposite. Dazai is trying to take his armor off – after all, the Port Mafia is the very reason he had to put it on in the first place – and the first piece that he will strip away is his position as the boss.

The brush of knuckles over Chuuya's cheek coaxes his head to the present.

"Still with me?" Dazai wants to know. Not just here, right now, but with the plan. Is Chuuya still on board?

“Just tell me one thing,” he says after a moment of chewing on his lip. He meets Dazai’s curious gaze. “Are you excited to be free?”

Dazai’s head tilts as if confused by the question. Then though… the most beautiful smile spreads across his face, small, slow, timid but oh so honest, bright enough to dispel Chuuya’s doubts.

“I am,” Dazai replies before his brows pull into a puzzled frown. “I think that I am. Is that bad? Do you hate me for that?”

Does he?

The better question to ask is, can he? And the answer to that is no. No, he cannot even though he wishes he could.

Not when Dazai is smiling like that.

Sighing, Chuuya pats his chest. “No,” he says and then, “but yes, I’m still with you. We’ll do this. It will work out.”

“You think so?”

It’s the first time that Dazai has expressed even a sprinkle of doubt about his own plan. Figures such a thing would happen on the day that it is supposed to go down.

So, for once, Chuuya is the one to reassure him with a firm nod. “Yeah. You’re the one who came up with it. Why wouldn’t it work?”

“Oho, did Chuuya just give me a compliment?” Dazai simpers at him like an idiot. “Today must be my lucky day.”

“I hate you,” Chuuya mutters, shaking his head. “You’re so annoying.”

Translation: I don’t want to fucking live without you, so, yes, this plan better work.

Not that Dazai needs a translation. He has always been able to read Chuuya like a book and today is no different as his stupid smile grows deeper, still lingering even when he grasps Chuuya’s chin and kisses him and Chuuya kisses him back and the world stands still for a moment.

Then it’s time.

Time to leave this room, this office, this floor. Time to fall and time to rise.

They walk down the corridor that leads to the elevator side by side, Chuuya's pulse echoing in his ears like a war drum.

All the high-ranking echelons that are gathered inside the strategy room rise to their feet as soon as Dazai enters; their eyes unmistakably fall to the identical scarfs around their necks, though no one dares to mention it. Are they going to have the same respect for Chuuya once this night is over? Or is it something he will have to fight for? How long did it take Dazai to earn the loyalty of his people?

Questions over questions crowd Chuuya's brain but the sting of his nails digging into his own skin forces him to stay present. This is important. He has to be on top of his game, now more than ever. The Colonel is the one who takes over presenting the facts to Dazai which are: the tower is under attack, the perpetrator is most likely the Bishop's Staff, and there are several ability users among their ranks. Fucking hypocrites.

He suggests different Port Mafia units to take up positions throughout the building, using their abilities to gain an advantage as the Bishop's Staff ability users will most likely succeed getting past the plethora of gunmen on the base floor – if they haven't already. Having expected this course of action, Dazai approves without much ado, sending the squad leaders on their way. The people that remain in the room are the executives and members of the inner circle.

"Since their main objective is getting to you, Boss," the Colonel continues once the room empties, "I strongly advise you to take up residence in the bunker for the time being. You will be safest there."

Dazai shares a brief glance with Chuuya. They discussed this. The bunker, located deep in the tunnels, was built during the Great War to keep the Port Mafia boss safe during bombings. The tower itself is already impenetrable but the bunker is the epitome of safety. No one gets in and no one gets out. Which is why Dazai can't go there, obviously. Not that he is planning on sharing this secret with anyone here.

"I agree," Dazai tells the Colonel, lying through his teeth. "I'll have my security detail escort me there as soon as we're done here."

The Colonel frowns. "Why not use your bodyguard?"

"My bodyguard will be of more use in battle."

Another lie. While it's true that Chuuya would be much more useful in

battle than bunkered away with Dazai, he is not going to let Dazai out of his sight today to make sure that everything goes as planned.

“He’ll have his own unit and position in the tower,” Dazai adds coolly. His firm tone doesn’t leave any room for more questions.

“There is another matter we should discuss,” Kouyou says, stepping to the other end of the table, unfazed by the resentment that Dazai has been harboring ever since the move she pulled with Oda’s orphans. Chuuya admires that. Kouyou will be useful once he takes over. Difficult too. “I’d like to remind you that we have another way of ending this battle. One that doesn’t require any losses on our side.”

Chuuya shifts on his feet. She is talking about the kill button – the one that would kill every single person with an eye prosthetic.

“You mean the one that we decided not to pursue any further the last time it was brought up?” Dazai asks, tipping his head to the side provocatively.

Kouyou doesn’t flinch. “Last time we weren’t under attack.”

“I don’t know why we are wasting our breath discussing this,” the Colonel cuts in with a frown. “Even if it was an option, it would still take the teach-team time to execute that plan.” He pauses when he gets another look at Kouyou though. “Unless…”

Unless the tech team already knows precisely what to do. Because they did pursue it further.

“We could end this,” Kouyou says, raising her chin as she stares back at Dazai. “Right now.”

“And what about the people who will end up as collateral damage because they happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time?” Dazai challenges. “Our people?”

“Acceptable losses. Just like the ones that will die today.”

Dazai shakes his head. “It would be a massacre, one that we would be responsible for this time. We are not terrorists.”

“But they are,” Kouyou retorts. “And if we have a way to stop them, we should use it.”

“No,” Dazai says with a derisive flip of his hand. “And this is the last

time I'm speaking of this."

Kouyou accepts her defeat in silence, yet something about her expression tells Chuuya that she isn't taking this as a loss. Putting the morals of this decision aside, Dazai, the boss of the Port Mafia, refused to end a war despite having a clear-cut way of doing so – in front of his executives. It's not a display of weakness, not per se, but it is Dazai picking the old-fashioned way. It is Dazai risking the loss of his people. It is Dazai refusing to see reason.

Of course, nothing is ever as it seems with Dazai. Little does Kouyou know that this is *exactly* what he wants. He doesn't want his people to remember him as the perfect leader; no, that would make it much harder for Chuuya to replace him. Instead, he wants them to remember him as flawed, unreasonable, a little arrogant — human after all.

It would be insane if it wasn't Dazai Osamu.

There are more orders after this, more decisions, and more strategies that Chuuya sits through, barely able to focus. He rubs his head, relieved when the meeting finally seems to come to an end. It's not entirely over though. Dazai asks Albatross to stay as the others begin to clear out.

"Grab Yuan – and Shirase if he's with her. I've assigned all of you to the docks," Dazai tells him. "A car is already waiting for you downstairs."

"Right, because there is currently nothing more important for us to do than to guard warehouses…" Albatross's voice is a mixture of sarcasm and confusion – at least, until his eyes slide to Dazai's side. To Chuuya, whose lips are tightly pressed shut. "Ah," he says then.

"It's an important job," Dazai says. "Our economy depends on the things we've got stored away there."

It's also a *safe* job. The safest one they can have when the tower is under attack. Chuuya asked Dazai to make sure that his friends were going to be as far away from the main commotion as possible this time – though, Dazai would have probably thought of that even if Chuuya hadn't specifically requested it.

Albatross must understand the implication behind it since he nods and flashes Dazai, or rather the two of them, an over-dramatic salute. "Got it, boss…es. We'll make sure the warehouses stay untouched."

Dazai gives him an acknowledging nod. “Thank you, Albatross.”

And that’s it.

The first phase of their plan, anyway.

“He’s good people,” Dazai says once it’s just the two of them. “Keep him close. He’ll make the transition easier.”

“I know that.” He tries to keep the bitterness out of his tone but fails. Chuuya averts his gaze. “That’s why he’d understand if he knew about the plan.”

“It would also put him into a difficult position. It’s better this way.” With that, Dazai rises to his feet and ends this discussion.

He’s also a mafioso who can handle it, Chuuya wants to say but he keeps the words to himself. They are futile anyway. Dazai has already made up his mind. There is no changing it anymore, no matter how hard he tries.

“Now,” Dazai turns to him and offers him his hand, “shall we continue?”

Chuuya accepts it with a slight scoff.

“What do you say about going out for dinner tomorrow? A small celebration for all our troubles.”

“I’m supposed to be mourning you tomorrow.”

Dazai grimaces. “You can do that over food. I’ll find something tucked away in some dark corner of the city.”

“You really think anyone’s going to let me out of sight tomorrow?”

“You’ll be the boss,” Dazai reminds him with a pointed squeeze. “You call the shots.”

Chuuya slows down, making the other man glance back at him, his expression less surprised than it is knowing. “It’ll be a mess tomorrow. They’ll need me. I can’t just…” His lips press together. “Vanish. Even if it’s for a few hours.”

Dazai releases a sigh before stepping closer and framing Chuuya’s face with the tips of his fingers, dancing across his skin like moonlight, tender but distant. “See, this is why you’re perfect for the job.” His

mouth twitches into an indulgent smile. “So dutiful. So loyal.”

Chuuya raises his chin; wraps his hand around Dazai’s wrist, seeking the warmth of Dazai’s blood that runs through his veins. He wants to *feel*.

“Fine,” Dazai says and makes a soft noise of defeat even though there was never an argument. “You won. We’ll have dinner once the dust settles.”

Chuuya’s breath comes out in a huff when he breaks the searing eye contact to continue their stroll. “Sure.”

“That will be our first date, Chuuya. Very important.”

“We’re married.”

“Semantics.”

“Still, we skipped too many steps to have a first anything now.”

“Who says that?”

Chuuya shoots him a wry look. “Me.”

“Well, I say differently,” Dazai retorts, pronouncing each word very dramatically and topping it off with an equally dramatic palm on his chest. “So what now?”

Dazai’s ability to make light of even the most serious situations has always aggravated Chuuya, making it seem like Dazai doesn’t care but lately, he has been suspecting that it’s the opposite. Dazai does care. That’s why he is playing the jester. It’s how he cools his nerves.

So Chuuya lets out a half-hearted breath and plays along. “Let’s compromise and say it’ll be the fourth date.”

“Fourth, huh? And what were those four days?”

“The first one was the… hmmm….”

“The auction,” Dazai suggests, bumping their shoulders together.

“The auction,” Chuuya agrees before snorting to himself.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“What is it? Tell me.”

“I was just thinking that Kafka was your version of a… bottle of wine or a bracelet – or whatever else people bring their first date as a gift.”

Dazai’s chuckle makes him preen in approval before he reigns it down with a stern scowl. “I suppose. I think the better equivalent would be gifting someone a pet.”

“You’d suck at dating in the normal world.”

“But I’d date you in the normal world and you liked it alright.”

Chuuya has to clear his throat when his neck burns with flustered heat. Damn the bastard. “Our second date was that restaurant you dragged me and Yuan to when you caught us spying.”

“That one didn’t last very long,” Dazai comments dryly. “Besides, is it really a date when someone’s third-wheeling?”

“No rules, remember?”

“Fine. The third one was the sleep-over right after.”

“No. That was the horse race,” Chuuya argues, frowning so hard he almost runs into a wall if not for the hand that tugs him back in time. “The third one’s always the sex date.”

“I see your point but what about Meursault then? Or that casino in Russia.”

“I told you it can’t be our first date. We’ve already had too many.”

“So which one is it? The twelfth?”

“Does it matter?”

“It does to me! I want to know. Now…” Dazai starts counting on his fingers with a concentrated squint on his face that is adorable enough to absorb all of Chuuya’s attention until the radios in their ears crackle with static.

"Two intruders spotted on level 30. One in a trench coat. He controls — shit, he has this beast —" The mafioso’s voice staggers to a shocked gasp before turning into a scream.

Chuuya's head snaps to Dazai; they trade a wordless look.

Part two of the fake-Dazai's-death mission is a go then.

"They're close if Misuki held his post."

"Of course he held his post."

Not even a heartbeat later, the sound of hurried footsteps pierces the silence.

"Stay back," Chuuya says, shielding him with an arm. "I'll take care of it."

"Remember, we need them alive."

"Yeah, yeah."

Chuuya's eyes slip shut as he focuses on the weight of the floor – the floor the intruders' feet are hitting with each step, the shape of their mass growing clearer and clearer until he can sense them right there and then and…

Boom.

The ground cracks underneath them when he plunges them into it with an oppressive force, not enough to break through the floor, just enough to disable them.

"Wait," the one that they need, Tanizaki, calls out, "we're not here for a fight!"

The other one bares his teeth as he attempts and fails to use that cloth monster of his to break free.

Chuuya approaches them with dismissive silence. Who are they trying to fool? Not here for a fight, his ass.

"I swear! We're looking for your boss – we need his help!" Tanizaki struggles against the clutch of gravity with wide, feverish eyes. "We know that Dostoevsky is the guy behind the Bishop's Staff! We know that he deceived us!"

Chuuya pauses but not for long. Dostoevsky probably put them up to this – fuck knows how he managed to talk to anyone from inside his cell but it's a trick. Meant to disorient Dazai – so it's up to Chuuya not to hesitate. He slides his hand into the pocket of his jacket and grasps

the long, thin shape of an injection. A dose of midazolam that will put Tanizaki to sleep until they need his ability.

“Wait.”

Chuuya’s jaw clenches, not daring to take his eyes off the two detectives. “Dazai, go back. They’re lying. Dostoevsky probably told them to say this.”

“We’re not, I *swear*! It was Ranpo – he found out and I know how it sounds but –”

“Shut up,” Chuuya hisses. “Another word and I’ll break your jaw.” But when he looks to his side, Dazai is studying Akutagawa with a frown that is way too fucking curious for a situation this delicate.

“So you’re not here to kill me, Akutagawa-kun?”

He has got to be kidding.

“I’ll decide that after you give me my sibling back.”

Tanizaki’s head jerks to his colleague before he shoots Dazai a pleading look, fixing his subordinating’s mistake. “He’s *not* here to kill you! We’re here to ask for help!”

Chuuya grabs Dazai’s arm. “We don’t have the time for this.”

“We do. It’s okay. Release them.” Dazai nods, telling him with his gaze that he knows what he’s doing except he *doesn’t*. He never does whenever the Agency is concerned.

“We have a plan,” Chuuya reminds him in a low voice.

“The best plans are flexible.”

“Dazai –” The hand that cups Chuuya’s cheek silences him, its gentleness bruising. He wishes Dazai would use force to make him listen, wishes Dazai would punch or slap him because the pain Chuuya can handle – this, however, he cannot.

“This is a good thing,” Dazai says with a crooked smile. “We won’t have to force Tanizaki to work with us and the Agency isn’t going to be a problem anymore.”

None of this is good. Something is *wrong*. But Dazai’s already turning back to the detectives with the confidence of a master expecting his

dog to obey and what other choice does Chuuya have? He is not the boss. Not yet.

He releases them.

“I can arrange for you to see Gin but whether they will come with you is entirely up to them.”

“I want to talk to them,” Akutagawa demands bluntly as he gets to his feet with a single-minded determination Chuuya would find entertaining, maybe even admirable if the situation was any different.

Dazai pulls out his radio in reply, speaking into his earpiece. “Gin, darling. Would you mind coming down to level 30?” There’s a pause as he listens to the response. “I’ll explain that later.” When he faces the two men, it is with a faint glimmer of satisfaction, like he just caught a fish on the line and is now waiting for it to tire itself out before reaping the benefits. “So you finally know. About Dostoevsky. And now you want the Port Mafia’s help.”

“Why should we help you after everything?” Chuuya asks with a scoff.

“We didn’t know. We thought we were doing the right thing. The evidence –”

“The evidence was fake.”

“We know that now!” Tanizaki’s chest sags in defeat. “Please.”

“We’ll help,” Dazai replies before flashing the detective a patronizing smile. “We’ll need something in return, of course. Your ability, Tanizaki-kun.”

“Okay, I’ll do it, just – there’s something you should know first.”

“Attention, attention, this is your captain speaking,” a voice suddenly says over Chuuya’s earpiece — only it is not just any voice but one with a distinct Russian accent that makes his blood run cold. “Don’t mind me. I’m in a good mood today. I hope I have the right channel. Osamu, blink if you can hear me – ah, there you are. Perfect.”

Dazai’s relaxed grin flickers, then slides entirely off his face and just like that, the entire plan comes to a standstill.

Chuuya lunges forward. “You helped him escape?!”

“Come and find me on the rooftop. Just you and I,” Dostoevsky says.

Tanizaki struggles to breathe around the hand that's wrapped around his throat, his skin draining of all color. "We thought –"

"I don't give a damn what you thought," Chuuya snarls, slamming him into a wall so hard that his body makes a dent. "Do you realize what you've just done?"

"No one else," Dostoevsky says.

"We'll w-work together… we'll –"

"No dogs allowed," Dostoevsky says.

Hissing out a breath, Chuuya dodges the sharp tail of a black beast by shuffling a step back, then another, and another as that diabolic voice in his ear whittles his spirit down piece by piece.

"Before you think of ways to slither out of this, I've recorded a very informative message about a certain book that will play over the intercom of this entire building if you decide to do something clever. And do you know what happens to a world when too many people find out that it's a mere illusion?"

The more people know about the Book, the flimsier this universe becomes. That is what Dazai told him last night. If more than a handful of people being aware of it already poses a danger, then what happens if hundreds — if thousands find out?

"It destabilizes. It crumbles apart and not even you and your dog are able to reverse that caliber of damage. Disobey and the world as you know it burns. You have ten minutes. Tick –"

Chuuya yanks that damned device out of Dazai's ear. "*No.*"

— tock.

If he still had a shred of hope left, the grim smile, stained with muted resignation, on Dazai's face robs Chuuya of it. But he can't accept that. Can't accept Dazai acting like his fate is already sealed, like there is nothing more he can do, damn it.

"I said no," Chuuya snaps before Dazai can even think of saying goodbye or that he is sorry or any other words of heroic stupidity. Shaking his head, he takes a step back and points a threatening finger at him. "Don't you dare."

Dazai's throat bobs. "I can't let him play that message."

"He's *lying*."

"I don't think he is."

"I don't care!"

"Everyone will die," Dazai tells him, a far-off quality to his voice – like he doesn't know that! "Your friends, Chuuya. Yuan. Albatross. Shirase. Are you really willing to take that risk?"

His words are abstract ideas and concepts, mere snowflakes compared to the avalanche that rises within Chuuya at the thought of Dazai leaving, reducing the rest of the world to irrelevant dust. It doesn't matter. None of it matters if Dazai lets Dostoevsky kill him – and that is what is going to happen if he goes up to that roof. Survival is only so important if there is nothing left to live for.

"Yes," Chuuya rasps, stiff with wild desperation.

Dazai's gaze softens. Because he knows – oh, he knows that is never as easy as that.

Chuuya backs away. He can't look at Dazai with that expression on his face. Can't think. And thinking is what they have to do to find a solution that doesn't involve Dazai or this entire world dying. "We'll figure something out just like we always do," he mutters to himself, "just like we always do. I mean, does that bastard even realize that he'll die too?! So he's bluffing!" He lifts his head to nod firmly. "He's bluffing! He has t — *don't* touch me." The second Dazai puts those arms around him, it's over. Chuuya can't let him come any closer. Can't let Dazai leave. Can't let Dazai move at all. "Don't you try to say goodbye."

Absurdly enough, Dazai listens to him; instead, the sorrow in his gaze fills the air like a living, breathing thing, clutching Chuuya's heart in its hands until it hurts to breathe. "Then I'm not going to say anything."

Dazed, Chuuya watches him turn around.

No.

This can't be it.

“Dazai!” he shouts, his voice a hollow, shredded thing, panic filling his mouth like bile. “Dazai! Dazai, come *back* —” His words crack around the last syllable, no longer able to contain the terror that grows and grows inside of him. “Come back, you damned bastard…”

The second Dazai puts those arms around him, it’s over.

Unless Chuuya disarms him first.

A physical fight, Dazai will expect though.

Chuuya touches the pocket where he is keeping the midazolam. He won’t expect this.

And so he runs. He runs until he can wrap his arms around Dazai from behind, press his nose against his back and beg. Before he has to resort to the alternative. “Let me knock you out,” he whispers so only Dazai can hear, not Dostoevsky, not the detectives, just the two of them against everyone else. “He’s watching us, right? You can’t disobey if you’re not conscious. Let *me*.”

Dazai clasps Chuuya’s hand as they cling to him, allowing them this one last moment. Then he breaks it. “He’ll see through it.”

“How?!”

Dazai twists in his arms; slides his hands down Chuuya’s back; pulls him into his chest, tightly, so fucking tightly but not tightly enough.

“No,” Chuuya says again and again, like a broken record that is stuck in denial. It’s not over. Not as long as he has a say in it and he does.

Dazai brushes his nose against his, then buries his face in Chuuya’s neck. “I love you.”

The words make him recoil harder than a punch. “No, don’t –“ His fingers dig into his pocket, looking for the injection –

But the only thing they grasp is air.

The midazolam is gone.

Realization sinks in at the same time as the needle that Dazai drives into his skin.

He stole it.

He stole it before Chuuya could use it on him.

Probably before Chuuya ever even thought of using it on him.

He *stole* it.

“What did you do?” he hisses.

Staring helplessly back at him, Dazai lets the injection drop to the floor. “What you were about to do.”

“Because I’m trying to save you, you —” Chuuya charges at him, he can still knock him out, still prevent him from going to that roof, but an alien numbness in his limbs makes him stumble. All Dazai has to do to catch him in his arms is stepping aside. That is all. “You’ll *die*. He’ll kill you — and you promised!”

“If I don’t go,” Dazai squeezes both of Chuuya’s trembling fists against his chest, “we all die anyway.”

“You don’t know that!” Chuuya trashes against him but it’s useless. Already his body is starting to feel the effects of the drug.

“I’m not going to take that risk.”

“I hate you,” Chuuya chokes out, clinging to Dazai’s shoulders and the consciousness that is swiftly going limp around him and pulling him along.

Dazai breathes out a startled, half-wild rasp against him. “Don’t say that. Take that back.”

Chuuya’s whole face contorts in pain, in grief, in powerless anger but he still shakes his head, refusing to tolerate this wretched ending that Dazai decided to write for them. He refuses to. “You promised, Dazai. You…” His teeth clench. “*Promised* me. I hate you.”

“No, tell me you love me too,” Dazai begs but his voice grows more and more distant as the darkness seeps into Chuuya like syrup and fills his veins with a heaviness that even he cannot manipulate. “Tell me –”

Tell him… what?

But the thought is too far away.

Chuuya sinks.

***

Dazai is still dazedly staring at the crumpled body on the floor when a figure enters his field of vision. “Why aren’t you in the bunker?” Gin whisper-hisses, crouching down across from him. “There are ability users fighting all over the building!”

“Gin.”

Their head snaps to the source of that voice and they freeze upon seeing their brother.

“Take him away,” Dazai says hoarsely.

Torn between shock and confusion, Gin looks down again. “I… okay.”

“Just for an hour or two.” He barely hears his own voice as he brushes Chuuya’s cheek. Just a few more seconds, then he will go. “By then it will be over.”

Only a second longer…

“Boss,” Gin says.

… and he has to let go.

Sliding his arms underneath Chuuya’s arms to pick him instead, Dazai forces himself to his feet; forces himself to nod at Tanizaki and hand Chuuya over; forces himself to step away. To *focus*.

Gin is still staring at him with questions.

What did they say?

Boss, what are you going to do?

“Complete the final phase. Like I was meant to from the start.” When they receive him with reluctant silence rather than instant compliance, he jerks his hand in the opposite direction. “*Go*.”

This time, they listen.

The three – no, the four of them grow smaller and smaller until they disappear from his view entirely. Only then does Dazai find the surveillance camera that hides in the corner above him. Dostoevsky’s somewhere watching this. Let him know that he is coming. But he isn’t the one who grew up in this tower, who hid in the morgue and

ate lunch in empty boardrooms. Dazai knows this place like the back of his hand. He knows the spots that are hidden from the surveillance room.

As soon as he finds one such spot, he calls a number. It only rings one time.

“Atsushi-kun, abandon your post and go to the surveillance room,” Dazai tells him without any explanations. There is no time for them. “Whoever is in there, get inside and kill them no matter what it takes. There will be a recording. You have to find it and stop it from playing. Destroy the entire surveillance room, kill the server if you have to, I don’t care. Just don’t let it play under any circumstances, you hear me?”

“Don’t let the recording play,” Atsushi repeats with a slight breath. “I got it. *We* got it.”

So Kyouka is with him. Good. She will know what to do.

“Hurry.”

***

The journey to the top of the tower is a blur. Dazai remembers telling himself to use the time to think his way out of it but within the blink of an eye, he is already on the roof, his scarf and his hair fluttering in the wind. The sun has already set.

“Well, well,” Dostoevsky greets him, perched on top of the air conditioning unit. “So we meet again.”

Dazai stops a few feet away from him. “What is this?”

“You know what this is. You wrote this ending yourself,” Dostoevsky tips his head to the side, feigning confusion, “or is this not the day that you chose to die? All I’m asking is you to actually go through with it.” He pretends to yawn. “Fake deaths are so 2012.”

“So is asking someone to commit suicide.”

A shrug. “Seems that we are both old-fashioned.”

“Cut the crap, Fyodor,” Dazai mutters, a low steady panic poisoning his patience. “What do you want?”

“I told you.”

Dazai's teeth nearly crack from clenching. "Except my death."

"Nothing, and oh, would you look at that?" He delicately points at the watch around his wrist. "Four minutes, thirty seconds, and counting. Tick-tock."

Think.

Think.

That's what you're good at.

But no matter how hard he strains to come up with something, his head remains utterly and tragically blank. "If you let that message play," Dazai says the first incompetent observation that comes to him when he opens his mouth, "you'll die too."

"So?" Dostoevsky is just as impressed by it as him.

But maybe…

Dazai stuffs his hands into his pockets and slowly circles the rat. "So what's the point of this crusade if you end up dead?"

"I'm not afraid of dying, Osamu," Dostoevsky says, following each step that he takes with his eyes. "In fact, I'd be delighted to find out what would become of this mirage of a world if I blew it up. I suspect it would even further my cause. So go ahead, we can watch it burn together, like in the old days." He pauses and so does Dazai. "Except you don't want it to burn, do you?"

From the first day he got his hands on the Book and came up with this life charade, the only goal has been to keep the blood of this world flowing. At first, it was to give Odasaku the life he never got to lead in all the other universes. But then…

He allowed himself to dream. Just a little. A dream of green, endless fields, of standing under the sun, of long nights and a shared bottle of wine and needy hands and and and…

He didn't want anything big. All he wanted was to try.

Six months ago, he would have given Dostoevsky what he wants without hesitation. Now it is the thing that might damn this entire world.

"You don't want him to burn because you care," Dostoevsky goes on

and on and on, his accusations and insults falling like water, submerging Dazai in an ocean of oxidizing boredom. “You care about people, about surviving, about keeping this illusion alive. It’s disappointing. But unlike you, I am not burdened by those pesky human emotions that make something so simple so hard for you. Whether you die or whether we both die, I will have done what I –”

The rest of his speech bleeds into a choked breath when Dazai wraps two hands around his throat. “I’m so *sick* of hearing you talk,” he hisses, squeezing his flesh. “Here. Feel anything? Feel that?” He barks out a wild laugh. “You’re not burdened by anything because you’ve numbed yourself to everything! *That’s* the illusion! You’re delusional, not me!”

Dostoevsky blindly shoves at him, looking so pathetically human. “— off me…!”

“No,” Dazai snarls, “feel!”

“Get your…” Dazai hopes he feels everything as he trashes underneath him; hopes he feels the physical agony of oxygen deprivation and the tide of emotions that he has been suppressing all the time – the grief, the guilt, the shame, the entire fucking alphabet of human existence.”… hands away from me…”

“I said *feel.”*

But killing Dostoevsky won’t stop the message. He would have made sure of that.

Releasing his neck, Dazai grabs his shoulders instead, shakes them as Dostoevsky wheezes and coughs, chest spasming uncontrollably. “I’ll help you. I’ll help you control your ability.” Dazai’s fingers clench in the fabric of his clothes. “Fuck, I’ll hold your hand for a month if that’s what it takes to purge that god complex out of you, I’ll do anything you want, just let me keep this one promise! Just this one!”

Dostoevsky’s shallow breaths rush through his nose as his eyes narrow. “Beg.”

Dazai’s mouth presses shut on instinct.

“Beg if you really want it!”

“Please!”

Dostoevsky slowly sits up, wraps an arm around the back of Dazai's neck, and yanks him down to his mouth. "No."

Dazai jerks away with a sneer. "Then let it play. Let the world burn." But a part of him shuts down, preparing for his own demise, whether it is by dying alone or dying with the rest of this universe.

Turning his back to Dostoevsky, he thinks about Atsushi and Kyouka. It's a useless endeavor, he knows that. If there was any chance of someone breaking into the surveillance room, Dostoevsky wouldn't have made the threat. But it's something. It's proof that Dazai tried. Maybe Chuuya will hate him less if he sees that Dazai tried. He did.

"You won't reach your precious dog in time," Dostoevsky mutters with a sigh, still on his back. "You'll die with me by your side." Staring up at the sky, he laughs. "How romantic. Isn't a double suicide what you've always wanted?"

"Not with you."

Dostoevsky shrugs. "Ah, it's the only thing you'll get, I'm afraid."

Think.

So it seems. Either Dazai dies alone, breaking his promise, or he drags the rest of this beautiful, terrible world down with him, only with Dostoevsky by his side.

Think.

He squeezes his eyes closed. A thousand tiny moments come to life in a flurry of motion, a symphony of whispers and screams that crescendo with each turn. The fragments of his life, of a million other lives, flood him. Time stretches and warps, unfurling like a flowing river in front of him…

Hey, Chuuya. I've been waiting for you.

I wasn't the one who was late.

Lady Noriko. A worthy possession.

Are you planning on bidding on her?

I bet Albatross would love that. But no. I have my eyes set on something else.

Go ahead, Chuuya. Kiss me if you want.

Because you're not nice or good or kind. Because you forced me to marry you and join the Mafia and isolated me from my friends until they started seeing me as an enemy only to act like they are the ones who are in the wrong. Because you can't waltz into my life as the villain and then not play the fucking part!

I promise to you, Chuuya, I am not going to be your villain. I will lay down my life and those of my subordinates to protect both you and your people. I will kill for you and your people. And I will make you and your people my people. You will have both my fealty and my loyalty for as long as I live.

Dazai… Don't become a fool any time soon. Stay smart.

Angels are messengers of god. This is a declaration.

The ring and the compass were made from the same material and by the same ability user. Wherever one goes, the other follows. Which means that as long as you hold onto the ring, the compass will always be able to find you, and vice versa.

I promise to you, Dazai Osamu. I will give my blood — my everything — to protect you and the Port Mafia. I will lay down my life in your hands so you can do whatever you deem necessary to achieve your goals. And everyone who stands in your way will learn firsthand how merciless the two of us can be. I will kill, die, and I will live for you and only you.

Even you can't bully someone into living.

Watch me.

Everything that I did from making you marry me to making you shadow me to let you do whatever you want without any consequences has been to set you up as the next boss. That's it. That's all this ever was.

What if we… just go?

Three years. And then, we'll see.

Deal.

Deal.

No, even I didn't know that ghosts were a thing. Who would have known that the clown was telling the truth back then.

I made you a promise once and I don't intend to break it. I will never leave you.

You are like the sun, you know. You are there, in every single universe. You're always there.

Trust me. They will come to love you, just as I did.

This is the point that connects every universe. It's always the same no matter which universe you're in… at least, so I think. I also suspect that it's the place where the veil between our and other universes is the thinnest, so sometimes, things slip through.

I love you.

I hate you.

You care about people, about surviving, about keeping this illusion alive.

… before it comes to a stop, settling into an electric stillness.

Blinking, Dazai slides his hand into the pocket of his coat and grasps the shape of two things. His phone and the compass that he has been carrying with him ever since he gave Chuuya the matching ring.

Something sharp, strange and awful begins to take shape in him: an idea.

Dazai watched Chuuya die time and time again in another life, yet here he is, still alive. He watched men in this life die and come back to haunt them. Sometimes death is not the end but a stepping stone to something greater than that.

And all it requires is a leap of faith.

Dazai finds his phone next; presses it to his ear and waits as it rings and rings and rings.

"Having a little chat?" Dostoevsky inquires.

"I can at least say goodbye, can't I?"

"Make it brief. You've got *one* minute left," Dostoevsky says with a trembling excitement in his voice that borders insanity, the same kind of insanity that curses through Dazai when an automated voice tells him to leave a message after the beep.

“Chuuya…” Dazai inhales his name. “If I had a little more time, I would have chosen to watch the world collapse and die with you rather than… this. But I don’t. I don’t have enough time, so…” His fingers clench around the compass. “Remember the ring. Just remember the ring.” It’s ambiguous enough not to alert Dostoevsky to anything. For all he knows, Dazai could be talking about an engagement ring, something of sentimental value, rather than an enciphered message. “It will keep you going in the right direction even after this. Just remember the ring and I l—”

Dostoevsky tugs at the back of his coat. “Time’s up.”

Swallowing the enraged string of insults in his throat, Dazai sends the message. He will not waste his last words on this preposterous little man with a god complex. No, he tosses his phone aside. He takes a step forward.

It’s a strange feeling. He has been awaiting this end for so long and now that it’s here at last, the only thing on his mind is the vicious urge to take it all back, to get more, to get another chance – another second, another minute, another day.

Another real goodbye.

Another hug.

Another kiss.

Another lop-sided smile.

Another ‘I hate you.’

Just one more.

The wind drowns out the rest of his slurred wishes, beckoning Dazai closer to the ledge; and as it grows wilder, he holds onto that one ferocious spark of hope.

This world is just one of many and the veil between them all has been getting thinner. Dazai shouldn’t be in possession of his other selves’ memories. Yet he is. He managed to defy the intricate rules of this universe once. Who is to say he cannot do it twice?

Maybe, just maybe this doesn’t have to be the end.

Even though it feels an awful lot like it is, standing on the edge of an

abyss and facing the long way down.

Maybe.

It’s the last whisper that caresses his mind before gravity pulls his body from the rooftop and far, far away… taking its time.

***

“Dazai-san, we got it!” Atsushi frantically tells the radio when no one picks up the phone. “Dazai-san, we stopped the message from playing!”

“…”

He exchanges an uncertain look with Kyouka.

“Dazai-san?”

***

Consciousness returns to Chuuya in gulps. A flicker of light here, the tail-end of a sentence there, everything hazy and distorted, the voices around him seeming muted, world's away.

His eyes blink open dazedly. The first thing he notices through the viscous fog in his head is the hum of an engine. Car. He is in a car.

What happened?

He tries to sit up. Fails. His strength escapes his clutch every time he reaches for it. He makes a low sound of frustration in his throat.

The muffled conversation happening somewhere slows to a halt.

As he adjusts to the light, he becomes aware of the dull throbbing in the back of his head. The stiffness of his joints.

What happened?

"He's waking up."

"Chuuya?"

"What happened?" he rasps through gritted teeth. His body's refusal to listen to him makes him want to scream but even that requires a control that he currently does not possess.

"Chuuya, you should rest. Dazai said to –"

The rest of the speech vaporizes.

Dazai.

Dazai pressing his lips to Chuuya's forehead as he stabs a needle into his neck.

Dazai telling him I love you, I love you, I love you.

Dazai leaving to talk to Dostoevsky.

"Dazai," he whispers and heaves his sleeping body upright until he sees the three other people in the car. The detectives and Gin. He stares at the latter. "Where's Dazai?"

"You're safe."

"No, no, no. Where's Dazai? Where is he?"

Their lips press together. "Dazai's talking to Dostoevsky."

Chuuya slams his hand down. "Turn around!"

Tanizaki, who is behind the wheel, glances over his shoulder but the car continues driving.

"I said turn the fucking car around!"

"Chuuya," Gin tries, touching his arm.

"Fuck this," Chuuya brusquely shoves them away before gripping the door of the car, waiting for his fingers to glow red, "I'll do it myself."

"Gin, stop him!"

"No, let him, Gin. What?! You think he'll actually stay here? He's not our problem."

It takes longer than typical – the injection is still in his system. He's lucky he even woke up, just not lucky enough to have full control of his body so soon. But it doesn't matter. None of that matters now.

He rips the door open and croaks out a staggered breath when dusk greets him. How long was he unconscious? How long ago did Dazai leave?

Cars honk and people yell at him when he falls out and onto the road, the scrape of the asphalt against his skin tearing away layers of flesh. It has been so long since he had to deal with inconveniences like this. His ability usually protects him. But not right now. Right now it evades him like water flowing through a sieve.

He drags himself up anyway, arms trembling, a million tiny needles stabbing into his skin, each one leaving a searing trail of pain in its wake. It's rejuvenating, the pain. Fueling him with adrenaline. Pushing him forward just a bit stronger. Faster.

Disoriented, he scans his surroundings. Where are they? How far did they come while he was passed out?

But all the buildings, shops and street names blur together in front of his eyes, sucking all the oxygen out of his lungs and filling them with panic instead. Just then, a flash of light catches his eye. His glove must have come off at some point, exposing his bare hand and the ring around his finger.

What did Dazai say when he gave that thing to him?

Wherever one goes, the other follows. As long as you hold onto the ring, the compass will always be to find you, and vice versa.

The ring emits a beam of light pointing down the road.

Righting himself, Chuuya starts walking, faster and faster until there is enough feeling back in his feet to run, like his life depends on it, until, eventually, he is able to kick off the pavement and into the air without plunging back to the ground like a fat bird with broken wings. "What did you do?" he mutters. "Dazai, what the hell did you do?"

Soon he starts to recognize his surroundings. A neighborhood he once upon a time only ever visited for its high buildings and a neighborhood that has absurdly enough become home.

But the closer he gets, the more panicked chaos floods the streets, civilians running in the other direction like rats fleeing a sinking ship. It's the fight at the Port Mafia's base. The Bishop's Staff attack. Everyone with a sane mind would get as far away as possible from the lethal conflict happening at the tower. That's why the roads are blocked by a sea of black mafia cars. It has to be.

That's what he tells himself as he jumps from car to car, uninterested in the damage that his weight leaves behind or the fact that a young

girl starts sobbing when he rushes past her. Chuuya hasn't been on the side of the light for a long time now. Maybe not ever. Maybe Dazai was right all along and the darkness is where he thrives best, just like that god-forsaken flower.

He's close enough now that the Port Mafia headquarters tower ahead of him, tall and gigantic, impossible to miss. Using his ability, he kicks off the car roof under him and catapults himself into the air, ricocheting off the wall of a building and onto another one, higher and higher, faster and faster until he finally reaches his destination.

He's still in the air when he sees it. The small crowd of black that has gathered at the steps of the base. Mafiosi. All of them. And all of them surround something –

No.

Someone.

Chuuya is still in the air when he sees it. The smear of red amidst white pavement. A scarf that matches the color of his own.

He is still in the air when his heart contracts so tightly in his chest that the air stops flowing into his lungs – that his ability gives out under him, dropping him only several feet away from the –

From –

His ability must cushion his fall just in time. He still registers the pain that explodes behind his eyeballs and robs him of his breath instead of crashing to his death. But the picture that engulfs his blurred vision reduces his physical pain to a distant ache somewhere in the back of his mind. A mere afterthought.

Dazai is in front of him, however. His scarf. Chuuya staggers to his feet. Someone whispers his name. It doesn't reach him. He only sees the puddle of blood spreading underneath Dazai. The blood. Oh god, the blood. All that blood. How is there so much blood?

Chuuya sinks to his knees in front of him, his fingers trembling, not sure where to touch him, whether to touch him at all or whether he is going to disintegrate the second someone lays a finger on him.

"Dazai," he whispers. "Wake up. I'm here now."

Chuuya is here. Everything is okay now. They can figure it all out

together now. They can – they can carry out the plan and – they –

Someone pushes through the crowd of onlookers and ashen Mafia members. Kouyou. She stops short at the sight of –

At the sight. Her scarlet lips seal into a thin line.

Chuuya's own mouth quivers. This isn't right. This wasn't supposed to happen. This is *wrong*.

"Clear the area," he hears Kouyou order. "Take the body inside."

Chuuya bends over Dazai to shield him from the rest of the world – he is so limp underneath him. Lifeless. "Don't touch him." He aggressively shakes his head. Tears drip from his eyes, blurring his vision. "Get me the Agency's doctor," he snaps. "Get her here and – Just get her here!"

Someone obeys his command but most of the mafiosis remain where they are. Their invasive gazes penetrate them like bullets, shaking him with the suffocating urge to make them stop — make them all stop and stop everything else too.

Kouyou catches his eyes. The flash of sympathy he sees in her reflection hardens his jaw. She doesn't get to be sympathetic. No one does. There is nothing to be sympathetic about – Dazai's just –

Dazai's just lying there, motionless.

A shudder ripples through Chuuya. The air catches in his throat.

Across from him, Kouyou drops to one knee. He expects words, a lecture, a command – god, he wishes for someone to tell him what to do. How to feel. How to breathe.

Instead, she sinks to one knee and bows her head. To him.

She isn't seizing control.

She is giving it to him.

Because…

Chuuya's vision drifts downward… to him. To Dazai. His mouth slightly parted like he didn't get to finish inhaling. The eyes underneath his half-closed lids are vacant. His chest sits still.

The Port Mafia follows Kouyou, dropping to their knees and accepting Chuuya as their new leader.

Chuuya's chest collapses.

Dazai.

Chuuya takes in his lifeless face, the blood in his hair, the mangled mess that has become of his skull, the abnormal curve of his spine, the scarf, somehow still around his neck. He takes it all in and the pain from before breaks through the shock barrier that has been protecting him and splits him down in the middle.

A pain so violent that he can't breathe, can't think, can't see — can't do anything but withdraw in on himself and keep this agony locked inside of himself, because, oh, how it wishes to break free. To detonate and raze down everyone in the vicinity, and him too. So there is no more heartache, no more blood, no more dead bodies. So there is nothing, nothing at all. Only a black pit that devours everything in its path.

Chuuya's body shakes with the urge to let go, once and for all; the entire ground does too.

But the corrosive heat, eating its way through his body, remains sealed away.

The people around him remain on one knee.

And in the center of it all, Dazai Osamu remains dead.

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It takes the mortician eight hours to piece Dazai Osamu's broken body together — if not back to life, then, at the very least, back to resembling something human, something neat that can be placed in a coffin and presented to his people, so they can bid their farewell to the man that has been leading them for the last two years.

It will take time, and effort, but it will be worth it for closing a chapter is just as important, if not crucial, as beginning a new one.

The funeral isn't set for another couple of days. The new boss has to confirm the date, the location, the flowers, the other thousand details that need to be arranged but, first, the new boss wants to see the body.

***

“He is ready now for you, boss.”

Chuuya’s eyes drift past the mortician to the door. The door that separates these two rooms, one where he is standing in, the coroner, and Yuan, and one that holds the body.

But I am not ready, he thinks but his feet move – on autopilot – and his hand reaches for the doorknob – on autopilot, ignoring the mortician’s attempt to open the door for him.

“Do you want me to come with you?” Yuan asks.

“No,” he says, fingers going taut around the knob, “you can leave.”

It’s silent then. So silent as he opens the door and steps into the room, only illuminated by a dim light on the ceiling above the table where –

The door falls shut with a final click, stranding Chuuya here in this cold, barren room.

He sees himself taking one step, then another, like his mind has somehow separated from his body, now watching him live from afar. It feels like breathing. Automatic. Involuntary. He sees himself reach the head of the table –

The table.

Long and wide enough to fit the body of a grown man on it.

Dazai’s body.

Chuuya’s throat bobs as he takes him in. His eyes are closed. The blood on his face has been scrubbed away but the wounds from the asphalt still remain: clean but present. His hair isn’t tousled but combed back. The coroner laced his hands together and laid them on his stomach. The clothes are new. Fresh and ironed. Replacing his actual clothes.

It’s Dazai, still regal even in death, but his beauty is cold now, arrested in time, immortalized.

His skin. Chuuya’s fingers lift to his cheek, grazing it with the tips –

It’s cold. Hard. Dead.

Chuuya's expression twitches.

Is this a trick? Can it be? Could Dazai be so cruel?

He doesn't know.

And Dazai isn't here to tell him.

Except he is.

Right. Here.

Chuuya slowly sinks into the chair next to the table and brings his other hand to the body's face. "Dazai," he whispers. "Are you here?"

Silence.

"Is this you?" He brushes the pads of his thumbs over the elegant slope of Dazai's cheekbones. "Or is this some kind of illusion?"

Maybe it's a shape-shifter that died in his place. Or maybe this corpse isn't real, not human, and instead, it's made out of wax or plastic or cotton. Or maybe it's something that no one hasn't ever even thought of – no one but Dazai.

"Dazai?"

But Dazai has no answers for him. Dazai is dead. He cannot speak.

Chuuya's shoulders slump forward, leaning his forehead against Dazai's. Cold. He is so cold. He has always been cold but now his heart has stopped pumping blood and nothing keeps him warm anymore. Chuuya tilts his head sideways, brushing their cheeks together and curling his arms around Dazai's head. Maybe if he sits here long enough, Dazai will warm up again.

Time passes. Hours, Chuuya thinks. Perhaps even days. But the room remains the same, the body stays cold, and nothing changes.

And still, he cannot bring himself to let go. To leave Dazai behind, so alone. Even if it's just a plastic body. Even if it's not Dazai at all. Because behind Chuuya's closed eyelids, he is back in their bed, and it's still night, and Dazai's chest is full of life, rising and falling with each breath, and everything is fine.

So he keeps sitting there, holding onto Dazai and pretending that the cheek pressed up against him is warmed by the rush of his blood. He

doesn’t open his eyes. He doesn’t see that the ring around his finger has begun to glow anew; doesn’t know that the light that comes from it points somewhere far, far away. Far beyond this room, far beyond this city, and far beyond this world.

END OF PART III

Chapter End Notes

TWs: forced suicide, major character death, description of blood and mild gore, and nonconsensual drugging

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Before you guys yell at me: deep breaths, remember the tags (angst with a HAPPY ending, temporary mcd) and the fact that we still have 9 chapters left! Okay, now you get to yell at me <3

Chapter 42: Compass

PART IV: THE GROWING SEASON

"—been no more new attacks since the battle at the tower. It's like the entire organization disappeared from one day to another." The Colonel strokes his beard with a deep frown. „I cannot make sense of it."

"They're still here. They're just waiting," Chuuya says, dismissing his executive's curiosity with a flat stare. "Keep looking."

He will let hell freeze over before letting all these people get away blameless and unharmed.

Piano Man is next in line. "Dostoevsky hasn't been spotted since that day either. But he has clearly been active based on recent developments."

By recent developments, he is referring to the fact that the Agency has become Dostoevsky's next target. He has framed them for the murder of a bunch of inept government officials on live television.

Terrorism, the country says. Chuuya calls it karma.

Still, his fingers twitch inside his gloves. They might just be creative enough to slither out of their mess unharmed. If that happens, he will deal with them personally.

"Keep up the surveillance." His scowl wanders from the pile of papers towering in front of him to the people around the table. "What else?" he asks.

Silence.

Chuuya clicks his tongue. "There is always something."

That much he has learned since the day he became the boss. Somewhere, whether it's day or night, a fire is always burning. The work never stops.

But the longer he expectantly looks at his executives, the more unbearable the silence grows in the room, everyone's eyes fixed on something, just not on him.

It's Piano Man who sacrifices himself and leans closer to Chuuya, his voice quiet as he speaks. "The funeral is set to begin in an hour, boss."

Oh.

"Right," Chuuya says, nodding, then nodding once more before he rises to his feet. The funeral. "You're all excused."

The office empties quickly as though his people can't run away from him and his grief fast enough. It's funny. One might think they would know how to cope with death, considering they deal with it every day, but the past five days have proved the opposite. Mafiosi powerful enough to raze down entire cities – and they walk around him on eggshells. Around the entire topic, really. As if it wasn't only Dazai who vanished that day but his entire legacy, his life, his name even.

Chuuya can't remember the last time someone said his name. It's always *he* or *the boss* or nothing at all. Always something cold and impersonal… as though that will make it hurt less somehow.

It's funny yet it's also expected. Dazai told him as much when they were discussing the plan. He said that Chuuya wouldn't have to put on too big of a show as the Port Mafia would avoid any mentions out of respect.

As always, Dazai is right. His scheme is unfolding perfectly. Too perfectly.

But that is something that Chuuya can fix. Just as soon as –

"Are you ready?"

With a sigh, he turns around to face Yuan – oh, as well as Albatross and Shirase, all dressed in black formal wear. They come as a throuple nowadays.

He nods.

Just as soon as he gets over with the funeral.

Shirase clears his throat. Albatross just stares at him, cross-armed. Yuan gives him a pointed once-over. "Don't you want to change?"

"I'm already wearing all black," Chuuya says, brushing past the three of them without bothering to wait. His burgundy shirt has been replaced with a black one. Dazai's coat is black as well. It works.

“It’s also what you wear every day,” she points out somewhere close behind him.

“And every day here is someone’s funeral.”

The car waiting for them is sleek-black, just like the one transporting the body – except that one is adorned with flowers. Roses. Apparently, the Port Mafia’s vow of silence has an exception and that’s the funeral, which is elaborate and lavish. The two cars are accompanied by a motorcade of other vehicles, blocking the entire road from the Port Mafia base to the gravesite.

There are people. A lot of them. Most of them are Port Mafia, though Chuuya recognizes the faces of shell company executives and business affiliates in attendance. He thinks he has talked to some of them this week but he can’t be sure. Time likes to flatline these days. Names blur into faces and days blur into nights and grief blurs into anger until everything tastes the same.

Chuuya sits in the front row at the wake along with his new inner circle, watching people come and go as they pay their respects and offer him their dutiful condolences all the while Dazai’s dead body lies in its casket. His beauty is still as cold and as stiff as the day he fell 33 stories deep. He watches them offer incense and pray for his peaceful ever after at the altar. He watches them carry his casket away. He watches himself be the first to stand up and lead the way to the cemetery. He listens to the sutras chanted during the service. He watches himself offer his husband one last kindness: a single red rose, laid on top of his casket. As deceptively beautiful as Dazai himself and just as sharp – a lesson in thorns.

He is there but, at the same time, he is somewhere far, far away… following the light of a ring that Dazai once gave him. A ring that is supposed to point him toward Dazai. A ring whose light is still burning – and pointing somewhere other than the ground that Dazai’s body is currently being put under since the compass that is attached to the same ring is no longer there.

The funeral is beautiful; Chuuya simply wishes it didn’t take so long, so he can finally devote himself to something actually useful: the mission of finding Dazai.

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Nights are the worst.

Which is why he gave up on trying to sleep through them and decided to make use of the hours instead. Dazai's lifestyle habits start to make more and more sense every day. The irony is not lost on Chuuya.

Still.

Tonight he is looking through the shelves in the office and hunting for possible clues that Dazai might have left behind. Encoded day planners. Journal entries. Tickets to future shows. Anything.

There is the ring, of course, but –

The ring is complicated.

Chuuya is the boss of the Port Mafia now but that doesn't make him free. The opposite. He's trapped in a cage of gold. Every choice that he makes, every step that he takes, every word that he breathes affects the people working for and under him. He is as much theirs as they are his.

The ring is the first daffodil that blooms after a merciless winter and Chuuya will hunt for it no matter what it takes. He just has to make sure that he will leave something behind to return to first. Make sure that his people survive the cold too.

In the meantime, he hunts for clues.

Dazai gave him the ring months ago and he acquired the compass that goes with it even earlier. He knew something like this, like his…not death, could have happened from the very beginning and that means he might have left other clues.

The thing that Chuuya doesn't understand is why Dazai didn't mention it while they were scheming his other fake death. Why leave out the fact that the ring and the compass could be assets?

Did he not think it necessary?

Did he not trust Chuuya?

No.

There are not many hard truths in this world that Chuuya is sure of but the fact that Dazai Osamu trusted him is one of them. Dazai trusted him. He did.

He still does.

He has to.

Chuuya pulls the twentieth folder out of the cabinet and flips it open. Documents upon documents. Numbers. Big and serious words that take minutes to decipher – no clues though. It lands on the pile along with all the other work-related, and therefore irrelevant, files.

Yesterday it was the bedroom.

The day before Gin's office.

And two days ago, the desk.

Tomorrow… who knows. The tower has another 32 floors left to comb through.

The next few folders are equally as futile. In the one after that, Chuuya stumbles upon something precious. A hand-written note at the bottom of the page, just a tiny remark but it's Dazai's writing. Chuuya recognizes it from their lessons in literacy. It doesn't bring him any further in his search, practically useless, yet it uproots him, the ferocity of his longing that is hibernating in the pit of his stomach, waiting to come alive again… waiting.

Sitting back, Chuuya peels off the glove around his right hand and watches, with a pounding heart, as the ring around his index finger starts to shine again, an endless narrow line pointing somewhere past the office and its doors and probably past the city too.

Somewhere…

Somewhere out there, Dazai is still alive, and he, too, is waiting.

Somewhere.

Without tearing his eyes off the light, Chuuya slowly rises to his feet and starts to follow the beam.

It's not his first attempt.

He's been through this before; he has walked through the dim-lit office, he has dragged the doors open –

And come to a stop at the sight of three familiar faces, cuddled up on a couch – that was not there before – across from the security detail that is stationed outside of the doors.

For people who are determined to keep an eye on Chuuya, they do a shit job of it. All three of them have nodded off.

Shirase is the first one to blink himself awake and jump to his feet. "Chuuya," he says, rubbing his eyes. "You're… hey. What's up?"

"Chuuya?" Yuan mumbles before she, too, wakes up with a start. "Chuuya," she repeats, more firmly this time. "You should be asleep."

Albatross continues to snore to himself.

Even this, Chuuya has been through too.

His chest falls with a breath. He shoots his security guards a sidelong glance. The Port Mafia has accepted him as the new boss. There haven't been any protests aside from a small minority that Piano Man quickly took care of. Without even being asked to.

The Port Mafia has accepted him but they don't fear him. Not as they feared Dazai. Sometimes Chuuya even thinks they pity him – or worse, fear *for* him. For his sanity. Which is why his friends can pull shit like this and not be put into their place even though Chuuya already asked the guards once.

If Dazai were here to whisper advice in his ear, he'd tell him to deal with this problem quickly before it grows roots.

He isn't here though and Chuuya doesn't care enough. Even if he wanted to. All of his energy gets put into two things and two things only: the Port Mafia's conflict with the Bishop's Staff and finding Dazai. That's it. That's all he can give.

So Chuuya doesn't punish his guards for their incompetence, nor does he scold his friends for their lack of trust in him. He just continues on his way.

The first time Chuuya stood on this rooftop, he got sick and watched his vomit fall 33 stories deep, only hours after listening to the voicemail and seeing the beam of his ring, shining away from Dazai's broken body. Too far away. Chuuya's destination lies somewhere far beyond this city and is best seen from high above.

"Just where are you?" he whispers, gazing out into the dark night surrounding him. The wind swallows his words.

Where are you? Where are you? Where are you? Where –

Footsteps sound behind him.

Chuuya sighs.

“You’ll get sick. Here,” Yuan says and puts a blanket around him.

He makes himself meet her gaze: an aberrant mixture of concern and confusion. “I don’t get sick.”

“Everyone gets sick.” She looks like she is about to say something else when she catches sight of the ring. Familiar frown lines appear on her forehead. “Chuuya…”

That tone.

“Don’t,” he warns her. He doesn’t need another lecture. He has already heard it all. It’s too dangerous to follow the mysterious beam of a mysterious ring. It’s delusional. It’s a trap. He *knows*.

“We’re worried.”

“I’m not crazy,” he snaps.

Yuan pauses. Frowns. “No one thinks you’re crazy. We just… we don’t want you to get your hopes up. The compass could be anywhere.”

Chuuya looks away. “It was his compass.”

“Anyone could have stolen it.”

“Not from *him*.”

From Dazai fucking Osamu who stole the injection before Chuuya could even think of using it. A man like that does not simply get robbed. Especially not after leaving that voicemail.

“And what about Dostoevsky?”

Chuuya’s gaze jerks back to her. His jaw clenches. “All the better.” He will get to watch the life bleed out of his soulless eyes. Slowly. Patiently. Taking his sweet time.

“Not if it’s a trap or –”

He sees Yuan’s mouth move but none of her arguments reach his ears. All he can hear is Dazai’s *if anything happens to me* –

He hears *If I had a little more time, I would have chosen to watch the world collapse and die with you rather than… this. But I don't. I don't have enough time, so…*

He hears *Remember the ring. Just remember the ring.*

He hears *I hate you* and the startled, frantic *Don't say that. Take that back* in reply.

He didn't say it back.

Dazai has to be on the other side of the ring because Chuuya didn't say it back and it can't end like that.

He has to say it back.

***

He waits a few days until the frenzy settles and the Mafia, slowly, assumes its normal course. There is enough work to keep Chuuya occupied in his office for days. His silence will not raise any suspicion.

Then he tells his friends.

"You can't just leave," Albatross says.

Chuuya turns away from the city outside the windows to face him. "I don't remember asking for your permission." Inhaling a sharp breath, he takes a step forward. "I'm the –"

"I didn't mean it like that," Albatross cuts in. "You can't just leave by *yourself*. You're the boss – that's exactly the problem. You're too important to just go on a no man's land mission."

"I can handle myself."

"Like Dazai handled himself?" Yuan asks.

Chuuya's posture stiffens. It's not the same. Dazai had a crazy plan that involved a thousand different variables. This is about brute strength and resilience and –

And she is right.

He might not like hearing it but she is.

"I'm not taking a bunch of Mafiosi with me." Chuuya crosses his arms

as he thinks about his options. “They’ll just slow me down. But no one else can know about this.” Especially not his most powerful people. It’s too risky.

“So take us,” Albatross suggests with a light-hearted shrug. His optimism wanes a little when he catches a glimpse of Chuuya’s skepticism “Seriously. You have to even think about it?”

“We won’t slow you down but we will protect you,” Yuan adds, giving him the ‘you have to say yes, there is no other way’ face that he hasn’t seen in quite a while. “You know, that’s the best way.”

Chuuya doesn’t answer. Not yet. He has to think.

Apparently, his friends take his silence as an invitation for more arguments since Yuan, not so gently, elbows Shirase in the ribs and shoots him a pointed glare.

“What else do you want me to say?” Shirase whisper-hisses and points at Chuuya. “He’ll say yes. Won’t you, Chuuya?”

“It’s not like you’re giving me much of a choice.” Perhaps that confession makes him a weak leader but a part of him, small, barely alive still, is glad for it. He is human. He has flaws. He is not above it all – not yet. It is the kind of leader he would have even liked being if only –

If only someone else were here to witness it.

“I’d rather take you with me now than have you trail me from an unsafe distance,” Chuuya mutters. That way, he will at least get to put his entire focus into one task and one task only.

Albatross nods. “It’s settled then.”

“Road trip!” Shirase exclaims.

The other two chuckle at that, exchanging intimate smiles – smiles that Chuuya cannot share with them because, for him, it’s not just a fun little day trip. It’s everything.

They make arrangements to set out as soon as the sun rises the next day. While Albatross volunteers to take care of the logistical planning, Chuuya has to deal with providing a cover for his absence. And a temporary substitute – who arrives in the Port Mafia’s tea room an hour later.

“Boss,” Kouyou greets him and bows her head before taking a seat on the tatami mat. “Thank you for the invitation. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Dazai rarely used it. Chuuya has never seen him entertain any guests there, but Chuuya discovered it on one of his hunts and decided it would be the place where he would meet his executives. At first, it was a gesture of respect and tradition, but the whole thing has something meditative about it. It’s nice. As nice as it gets these days.

Sifting the matcha powder, Chuuya clears his throat. “I wish to discuss something with you, Kouyou-san. It’s important.”

“I have no doubt that it is,” she replies softly. “Let’s enjoy the tea first.”

It’s not the easiest thing to do when his nerves are thrumming with impatience – and predetermined defensiveness. Kouyou is unmistakably the best choice to represent the Port Mafia while he is gone but her fierce loyalty and dutifulness might end up being a roadblock for tomorrow’s excursion.

So far, she has been one of Chuuya’s most devoted supporters when it comes to the choices he has to make as the boss. If he is honest, it came as a surprise to him. Dazai had predicted as much though.

Despite how many times Kouyou questioned Dazai’s leadership style, she never actually intended to take his place. For some insane reason, she thinks Chuuya makes the better leader – hence, her agreeable nature and, almost familiar, support.

But even her thread of compassion has an end, and Chuuya suspects she will reach it when she hears about his plan to find… well, to find the man that she clearly didn’t want as her boss anymore.

After serving Kouyou her tea as well as a piece of wagashi, her favorite type of candy, Chuuya sits back and takes a deep breath before speaking. “I have to leave for an indefinite amount of time to attend to something personal.” It’s a flimsy excuse but it’s the only one that he has to offer. Chuuya raises his chin to meet her gaze, as patient as ever. “I want you to oversee the Port Mafia during my absence.”

“Do you intend to come back?”

Chuuya blinks. He expected stern disapproval, not this. He opens his

mouth to offer her the automatic reply on his tongue but he halts before speaking. Does he? If he goes out and doesn't find what he is so desperately looking for, will he come back still?

The truth is that he won't want to.

The truth is also that he has nowhere else to go other than here. The place where he belongs. The place where Dazai was born and raised. The place where they found the closest thing to contentment that people like them can get. The place that he promised Dazai to lead and protect.

How could he break such a promise?

After another moment, Chuuya nods. Firmly.

"Good." Kouyou smiles at him. "It will be my honor to oversee the organization while you're away, boss."

"You don't want to know what personal matters I'm attending to?" Chuuya asks before thinking better of it.

"Would you tell me the truth if I did?"

His lips press shut.

She tips her head forward at him as if to say, 'There you have it.' "I don't need to know the details of your absence to see why you have to go." A pause. "You will make a fine leader someday soon, I believe in that, but there is something holding you back at the moment. You seem… haunted."

Chuuya's breath stills.

Haunted.

If he seems like that, it's because he *is.*

No matter where he looks or where he goes, he expects to see Dazai waiting for him around the corner. The office. The bedroom. The elevator…

His ghost is in every room, every shadow, every damn hallway that this building possesses. It's everywhere.

Because that's what it was supposed to be like.

Chuuya as the new leader and Dazai helping him out from behind the curtains, finally free for the first time in his life.

Dazai was supposed to *be* here. Not as a ghost or a fever dream but as his *partner*.

He was supposed to be here and now it's up to Chuuya to find him.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this," he admits in a whisper, eyes glued to his lap. He can't tell Kouyou the whole truth but he can say this. This is not what his life was supposed to look like. Dazai was going to be by his side the entire time. They were going to have a future. Even that damned farm that Chuuya wasn't sure he wanted. They were going to have a *chance*.

But all that space that was reserved for Dazai and their life together is now hollow, and Chuuya doesn't know what to do with it – with all the *supposed to*s and the plans and the feelings.

"I lost someone special to me too, once."

The quiet confession drags Chuuya's eyes up to look at her. He heard whispers here and there, about Kouyou's past, but nothing solid, of course. It doesn't surprise him to hear say this. Their world isn't a kind one. It's rare to meet someone who hasn't lost a person or two. He is more stunned by the fact that she chose to tell him. Kouyou's sympathy never extends past a professional barrier between her and everyone else.

"I thought I'd never move past it," she continues as a shadow falls over her beautiful smile, making it a little sad, a little sorrowful. "The grief felt never-ending." Her eyelids flutter shut for a moment – she exhales and that weight, that Chuuya just saw, dispels into thin air. "But I did."

"Let me guess," Chuuya says, voice dry and bitter, "so will I?"

Kouyou raises her fingers to his face and ever so softly touches his cheekbone. "All you have to do is stop resisting. Surrender to the grief and let go. It only hurts so much because you're not letting it."

Except that there is so much of it that it will simply swallow Chuuya whole. There will be nothing left if he surrenders.

He shakes his head. "It will break me."

“So break.” Kouyou’s grip forces him to meet her intense eyes. “The day I lost my loved one, I also lost my innocence. I thought it was the worst thing that could have happened to me. It turns out it was the best. Look around you, Chuuya. There is no place here for innocence. The child that I had been before never would have survived, but the woman that it made out of me did – not only that but she thrived. Your grief…” Her hand slides down to cover the place where his heart resides. “Is your biggest strength. Don’t treat it like an enemy.”

That word, *innocence*, triggers something in him. A vicious flash of resentment. “My innocence was stolen before I was even born,” he hisses, flinching away from her touch. “Your childhood was taken too early? I never even had one. I *know* grief. It’s followed me my entire life!”

“Precisely. After everything you’ve been through, you’re going to let one loss define the rest of your life?”

Chuuya’s teeth clench.

It’s *not* the same.

“You’ve lost nearly all of your friends several months ago. What’s one more life?” Kouyou challenges, unfazed by his bared teeth – the opposite, in fact. She seems to thrive on his fury. To want the monster to come out and ravage everything in its surrounding.

Suddenly, Chuuya’s anger drains out of him and leaves him with a leeching exhaustion that would bring him to his knees if he weren’t already on them. “What’s the point of it all then?” he says in a ragged murmur. “What’s the point of fighting if everyone’s just going to die in the end.”

What’s the point of living, opening his heart to someone, if death has no meaning anymore?

“That’s for you to decide.” Kouyou tilts her head to the side. “Are you going to let the inevitability of pain stop you from trying or are you going to use it to your advantage? Work smarter, harder, *better?”*

Chuuya can’t decide what he hates more: using Dazai’s death as some sick kind of lesson in his journey of self-development or the implication behind Kouyou’s words, the one that suggests that Dazai’s death could have been avoided with better thinking.

That Chuuya could have stopped it.

Most of all he hates that she is right.

He could have.

He could have made a thousand different choices that would have led to an entirely different outcome. But he didn't.

Instead, he offered his trust to a man that was only with him because of a promise on a platter.

He made a stupid choice. The wrong choice. Again. Now he has to live with it. Again.

The question that remains is what choice is he going to make now.

***

They board a Port Mafia chopper, piloted by Albatross, and set out at sunset the next day. Considering they don't know where the ring will lead them, it's easier that way. It takes them a while to figure out the best way to follow the beam, but once they do, all they have to do is lean back and wait.

Chuuya has never been good at waiting for things to happen.

"You know, you can use the time to take a nap," Albatross eventually says to him over the headset. His eyes rake over Chuuya. "You look like you could use one."

"I don't want to sleep."

His eyelids are bruised from staying open all the time but the mere thought of falling asleep fills his mouth with bile.

"It's the dream, isn't it?" Chuuya's gaze slowly slides to Albatross who chooses to stare straight ahead this time. "I've been having dreams about him too. It sucks. So…" He clears his throat and nods awkwardly. "I get it, man."

It's hard to remember that Chuuya isn't the only one who lost Dazai that day. Albatross has known him since his childhood. Dazai may not have been the most forthcoming person but he was his friend.

Chuuya lets his eyes fall closed for a moment. That alone is enough to flood his blood with the relief of rest. "I hate that moment after waking up. When I don't remember yet."

The dreams are not the problem – the dreams are *wonderful.*

It's the part where he realizes that is all they were. Wandering memories and abandoned wishes that have nowhere else to go.

Albatross acknowledges his confession with a respectful silence.

What else is there to say?

"He has to be there," Chuuya murmurs, staring at the ring around his finger. He just has to. It would be too cruel of a coincidence for him not to be. It would be too heartless to give him hope only to devour it after all.

He has to be there.

***

They are flying above Tottori's sand dunes when Albatross, frowning, says, "We're changing directions."

Chuuya blinks at the ring and it's true. The beam has mostly been straight, yet now it's shining to the side, meaning that they have strayed from the right path.

Albatross turns the chopper around – only for the beam to continue to shine to the side.

"I don't get it. It's leading us in circles."

Chuuya's eyes dart from the ring to the window. His heart hammers. His thoughts race. Something clicks.

"It's because we're here," he concludes breathlessly.

That gets the attention of the others.

"We are?" Yuan asks.

"But there is nothing there," Shirase points out the obvious. "We're in the desert, dude."

"There has to be something," Chuuya snaps before shooting Albatross a look. "Get us on the ground. We'll go from there."

His faith in the ring is unwavering; there has to be something or else it wouldn't have led him all the way out here but –

Chuuya is the first one to jump out of the chopper and squint at his surroundings.

Shirase is right.

All around them are sand dunes. A whole lot of *nothing*.

“Now what?” he hears Albatross ask behind him.

“Chuuya do – ew, fuck, I’ve got sand in my –”

Chuuya’s gaze falls to his ring and the beam coming from it – a straight line once again. Then he begins to walk. To run.

The distance must have been too small from above.

They are close.

He is close.

The violent beat of his pulse in his ears drowns out his friends’ voices as his feet carry him straight ahead and up the slope of a sand dune. He stumbles, the sand uneven and dangerous. That doesn’t stop him. Right now, he thinks, nothing can.

He can barely see from all the sand in his eyes when he arrives at the top, but his vision is still decent enough to spot *it*. The house.

A breathless laugh bursts from him.

The house is so small that it blends together with its surroundings – that is why they didn’t see it.

It’s a weird place to go into hiding, no question, but when have Dazai’s choices ever not been strange as hell?

He must be there.

He *must*.

It’s where the ring has led them to – and the ring will always take him to Dazai, that’s what he promised him when he gave it to Chuuya.

This must be it.

Chuuya begins to run again, not holding back this time, putting all of his energy and focus into every step so that they will finally, finally

take him to the person he has lost not too long ago.

He feels dizzy by the time he reaches his destination but for the first time since that day, his body stirs awake. His fingers shake. His vision swims. And he wouldn't have it any other way. He tears the door open and bursts inside.

"Dazai," he exclaims, eyes wildly darting around: shelves, books, a table. "Dazai, I did it. I found you. I –" He spins in useless circles as his lungs struggle to get enough oxygen. Shelves, books, a table. That's it. That's all there is. There is nothing else. No other floor.

"I found you," he whispers. "Where are you?"

He tries so hard to make sense of it.

But no matter how hard he squints, Dazai is nowhere to be seen.

He only turns around when his friends catch up to him.

"What is this place?" Shirase asks.

Chuuya aimlessly scans the surroundings.

He doesn't know. He doesn't know what this place is or why they were led here – all he knows is that Dazai is not here.

"Hey." Yuan. She touches his arm. "He's not…?"

No. He is not. Yet Chuuya can't bring himself to say these words. He can't –

"I don't know." He finally moves, taking another look at this damned house. "Maybe he's not here *right now?* Maybe he was here but he had to leave?" He glances at his ring again: shining in the other direction. He follows it as it leads him to the other door again but when he opens it –

There is only a desert out there. Only nothing.

And the ring beckons him to turn around again.

Because it's right here.

The other end of it. The compass. Dazai. They are here somewhere.

So where the fuck are they?

“The compass must be here,” Yuan says, so cautiously one might think Chuuya was made out of spun glass, about to shatter at any given moment. “Chuuya… I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry when we don’t know anything yet.” He rips the door open *again.* Bewildered confusion flows through his veins. It doesn’t make sense. None of it. “If it was just the compass all alone, then *where is it, huh?”* He gestures around them. “Do you see it anywhere? Because I don’t! It’s not here!”

“Chuuya –”

“Stop looking at me like I’m insane! I’m not! It’s not here when it should be!” Crossing the room, he starts grabbing the dusty books that fill the shelves, hurling them to the ground. “Maybe it’s hidden here, huh? Let’s see!” A lot of books and no fucking compass. “Where else could it be? Maybe the floor?”

Chuuya slams his foot into the ground until it breaks apart, revealing the sand underneath. “Not here either!” Wild, hysterical laughter spills from his mouth. “Can’t say that I’m surprised! It must be all a big joke to you!” He raises his head to the ceiling. “Are you laughing? Do you think that’s funny?”

As if in response, the ceiling begins to shake. The whole house.

“Chuuya, stop it!” he hears someone shout but it’s barely a whisper to his ears.

The violence humming under his skin is so much louder. So much more tempting too.

“Are you finally happy?” Dazai’s not here. Not really. But Chuuya has the feeling that he is somehow watching this from wherever the fuck he is. Watching and laughing. “*Are* you?”

He must be.

If he is heartless enough to send Chuuya on a wild goose chase, he must be heartless enough to find this amusing too.

So why not give the bastard one last fucking show? Make his time worth it?

Chuuya clenches his fists. The ground underneath sinks deeper and deeper and deeper –

Everything around him slowly begins to disappear in the midst of sand and wind and all that anger pouring from his heart. He tried so hard to be different from the thing inside him. He tried so hard to care and live and fight for the people he cares about. Even when it hurt, when his veins were so clogged with grief for his friends, his old life, for himself and the childhood he was robbed of – he still tried to find something to hold onto that would keep him going. He tried so hard to be human.

All his efforts must have been in vain, for even after all this time, he falls prey to a hunger that engulfs him in a relentless void – and he *revels* in it. It's the most gratifying sensation he has ever known.

He watches his power devour the earth beneath his feet, and a hunger awakens within him. He wants to carve his way through this entire planet, to shatter it like an eggshell, and then unleash the poison of corruption upon its shattered remains. Wants it to consume all that is left. To taste its destruction and revel in the rapture of —

Something touches him. Skin. Arms. They wrap around him from behind and hug him tightly enough to shock him out of his trance. Just for a second. But it's enough.

"Please," the person whispers. It's a voice he recognizes. Yuan, he thinks, that was her name, right? A friend? His friend? "Please, Chuuya, stop. Don't do this. Make it stop."

His eyelids flutter.

Does he want to stop something when it feels so good?

Can he even stop it?

"Please!"

It's a scream this time.

Chuuya blinks again – he sees the destruction he has caused. The crater that surrounds him. The way it gets deeper and deeper with each passing second. He is doing this, he realizes.

The arms around him get tighter.

Chuuya gasps out a breath and everything comes to a stop.

Silence.

“Dazai’s not here,” he whispers. He feels like he should cry. Or scream. Yet all he can do is stand there and repeat these words over and over. Dazai isn’t here. Dazai isn’t here because he is dead and he is not coming back either.

Yuan chokes out a sob against his shoulder, her tears staining his back. “I’m sorry, Chuuya. I am so, so sorry.”

Dazed, he slowly sinks to his knees.

He is sorry too.

***

The man wakes up with a silent gasp.

It takes him a few seconds to orientate himself: dim, intimate lighting, a painting on the wall, burgundy silk sheets and –

“You okay?”

His eyes dart to his side.

And Chuuya… with an eyepatch and the familiar swirl of corruption markings etched into his skin, winding around the slope of his neck and up to his cheek, only that they are black and cold rather than red with heat.

Dazai forces his expression to stay neutral. To breathe. Keeping a clear head in the face of peril is sometimes all it takes to tip the scales.

“Oi,” Chuuya says, arching his brows. “Bad dreams again?”

“Uh –” Dazai has to clear his throat, feeling like he hasn’t used it in ages. “Again?

Hearing himself speak solidifies the sneaking suspicion that this isn’t a hyper-vivid dream after all. Or is that just what every dream feels like? If this was a dream and he knew about it, he would either wake up or he could do whatever he wanted because it would be lucid dreaming. But after several attempts at conjuring a floating unicorn out of nowhere, nothing happens, which means: not a dream. Real.

Next to him, Chuuya shoots him a puzzled look before shaking his head with a sigh and directing his attention to the folders in his lap. “Seriously, you should let a doctor check it out already. Maybe do one of those sleep studies.”

Interesting.

So this has happened before.

By *this*, Dazai is not exactly sure what he means if he is being honest.

He just knows that something is off. He can feel it. The air – it tastes different somehow. So does his body. Sitting up is like operating a puppet. His bones rattle inside of him like they don't belong to him, strange and unfamiliar. Then there is that fog in his head. He can't quite make sense of his thoughts. Or his memories.

He clenches his eyes, trying to remember the last thing that he did but the only thing that comes to him is the beginning of a headache.

"Well, now you just look constipated."

Dazai exhales his disappointment with a breath and rubs the point between his brows. Thinking. "I'm going to ask you a couple of questions and you have to answer them without questioning why I'm asking them." Lifting his head, he turns to Chuuya. "Can you do that?"

To his surprise, Chuuya just shrugs before putting away his things. "'kay."

"Where are we?"

"My apartment."

Chuuya's apartment. That makes sense. It feels strange but it is logical.

"We're in the mafia," Dazai guesses next. "Right?"

"We sure are," Chuuya confirms with a huff of laughter.

"And you are…" When Dazai only gets a blank look in response, he gestures at Chuuya, urging him to finish the sentence.

"Your boyfriend? Chuuya? Nakahara Chuuya?" His brows draw tighter, the longer Dazai fishes for an answer. "The boss?"

"The boss," Dazai echoes and nods firmly, albeit with a frown. "You are the boss…" That was the plan, after all. So what is it then that makes this statement sound so uncanny? It's everything. The eyepatch. The markings — while not new, they should not be here. They only appear when he is under corruption which is not the case now. Even the light in Chuuya's one eye is different. The whole world seems to

be off-kilter, similar enough to fall for it at first glance but the longer he looks, the more mistakes he notices.

Then he asks, "*When* did you become the boss?"

Because that is what is missing, right? Chuuya is supposed to be the boss but he isn't – not yet. Somewhere along the way, Dazai has missed a step and now it's making him stumble.

Chuuya's head tilts. "While you were in the countryside… I know I promised not to ask but are you sure you're okay? If this is about the leftovers, I'm sorry, okay? I didn't fucking know you wanted to eat them that bad. You never eat your leftovers!"

Countryside…

"I'm not sure I am okay," Dazai admits, ignoring the part about the food. His issue is much, much bigger than leftovers.

"So talk to me. What's this all about? Because as far as I remember, we left the topic of sending you away in the past."

Sending him away?

Dazai blinks, remembering…

And it clicks.

Parts of it, anyway. Bits and pieces that slipped through the cracks.

The eyepatch. The farm. Sending Dazai away…

Dazai *remembers* this life.

Only he also remembers that it doesn't belong to him but to someone else. Another Dazai.

Realization rises inside of him like bile.

He rasps out a wild breathless laugh before lifting his head to meet Chuuya's concerned gaze. "So here is the thing… you're going to think I'm crazy but I swear to you I am not making this up." He sucks in a deep breath. "I'm not the Dazai that you think I am. I'm just stuck in his body."

And, he silently adds, in his *universe*.

Chapter 43: The Other Side

Chapter Notes

> Hello! As many of you have guessed in the comments, we've jumped into not just any universe but the universe of my other fic Tied Knots! You don't have to have read it to understand anything, so don't worry about that :) People who have read it though... enjoy this weird little chapter <3

“So here is the thing… you’re going to think I’m crazy but I swear to you I am not making this up.” He sucks in a deep breath. “I’m not the Dazai that you think I am. I’m just stuck in his body.”

“Hah?”

“How do I best explain this?” Dazai muses to himself, wincing. Then he lifts his head. “The Book. You know about that, right?”

“Obviously. We used the Book, Dazai,” Chuuya snaps. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“This is what I’m trying to tell you. I wasn’t there when you used it – your Dazai was but I’m not him. I’m someone else. I’m from another world. From one of the worlds inside of the book.”

Chuuya stares at him for another moment –

Then he lunges forward and slams Dazai down on the bed, pinning him underneath him with a fist curled in his t-shirt. “Either you’re fucking with me or you’re telling the truth but both options boil down to the same thing, Dazai. I’ll kick your ass so hard you won’t be able to sit on it for months.”

A raspy chuckle escapes Dazai. It’s truly inconvenient to start squirming now of all times but this body of his seems to be operating on a different level. A very *sensitive* level, it seems.

“You’re fucking with me, aren’t you?” Chuuya snaps, noticing it too.

“I wish I was, trust me, but I swear to you —” Dazai raises his hands with a grimace “— I’m not.”

Chuuya searches his face for the truth for so long that Dazai starts to lose hope. But after another heartbeat, Chuuya lets go of his shirt to

sit up. His scowl is chilling. “Explain.”

“I wish I could,” he retorts. “Really. Unfortunately, my memories are kind of fuzz—”

Chuuya yanks him up by the collar again. “You say you’re in the wrong body. That means you’re in *my* Dazai’s body. You’ve *stolen* his body!”

“I didn’t do it on purpose!”

“Then how did you do it?”

“I don’t know! I just woke up like this!”

“So where the fuck do you come from then? What other universe?!”

“We’re both in the Mafia too but you only joined recently because I made you – because I remembered you and I was selfish, I didn’t want to be alone, I wanted you to take over after I –” His voice staggers to a halt as his memories finish the sentence. The rooftop. Dostoevsky. *Chuuya.*

“After you *what?”*

After his death.

Dazai wanted Chuuya to take over after his death.

His eyelids slide shut. Something warm and wet rolls down his cheek.

His promise.

He broke his promise.

He died.

He left even after telling Chuuya he wouldn’t.

He just left.

The hand fisted in his t-shirt slackens. When Dazai opens his eyes, the face that meets his sight morphs from an impatient fury to a sinking dread. Chuuya swallows audibly. “You really are someone else,” he whispers.

Dazai feels too delirious with guilt to even be relieved.

Chuuya grabs his shoulder, shaking him. “Tell me how!”

“It doesn’t matter how.”

“Of course it matters!”

“I didn’t do it on purpose! I wouldn’t even know how!”

He was hoping for a miracle, sure, but that was 99% wishful thinking and only 1% rationality, which was only based on scraps of information about the Book. He stepped off that ledge believing he would die.

“Well, you must have done something or else you wouldn’t be here, in someone else’s body!”

“I killed myself,” Dazai exclaims, eyes wild as he stares up at Chuuya. The wrong Chuuya. “I stood on the rooftop of a 33 flight building and I jumped off it, okay? I killed myself and next thing I know, I wake up in this body. I don't know how or why it happened. It just *did*.”

Chuuya’s lips part but no sound comes out. He lets Dazai go when he pushes himself up though, wordlessly watching him slide off the bed.

It’s then that he glances down at himself for the first time and notices the underwear that he is wearing. In particular, the tiny, colorful bananas printed on it. The discovery is such an ironic contrast to everything else that a maddened laugh bursts out of him. And another one. Until he is standing in the middle of a room of an universe that he doesn’t belong to and hysterically giggling to himself like a maniac who has lost his mind.

Maybe he *has* lost his mind.

Who is to say that this isn’t some kind of divine punishment for what he did? His personal little hell. Stuck in yet another life that he does not want.

Chuuya backhands him across the face all of a sudden. “Stop laughing. This isn’t the time to fall apart.”

His giggling dies down. A cold burn on his cheek replaces it. Sniffing, he rubs the side of his face. “That hurt.”

Chuuya’s eye burns with something cold and vicious. “That’s for killing yourself.”

He probably deserves that and a lot more.

“Now get dressed and pull yourself together. We’ve got work to do.”

Still dazed from the thousand tiny realizations that have shaken his sanity, Dazai furrows his brows. “You’re going to make me work even now?”

With his hand around the doorknob, Chuuya scoffs coldly. “I’m not letting you anywhere near the Mafia or anyone else. I want my Dazai back though and that means I’ll have to work with you on sending you back wherever the hell you came from whether I want to or not. So stop fucking around and help me.”

***

After plundering Chuuya’s closet and washing his face with water cold enough to freeze blood into ice, Dazai follows the rich smell of good coffee. He passes a living room, the homely disarray all too familiar, on his way to the kitchen where Chuuya is currently pouring bourbon into a cup.

“Make that two,” Dazai says.

Chuuya turns his head and blinks, raising his brows as if to make sense of something he is seeing.

Dazai looks down at himself – he chose to wear matching black slacks and a button-down to feel at least somewhat like himself. “What?”

“You look strange.”

Crossing his arms, Dazai raises his brows. “How so?”

Chuuya stares at him for another beat before he tears his gaze away and shakes his head. “Doesn’t matter,” he mutters, grabbing a second cup from the shelf above him. “So. Any ideas on how to get out of this mess?”

“A couple, though I’m not sure how realistic they are.”

“Just spit ‘em out.”

“Well,” Dazai accepts the spiked coffee that Chuuya hands him and leans his hips against the counter, “I could try killing myself again.”

Chuuya’s eye widens in horror. “Absolutely *not*.”

“Yeah, figured you’d say that.”

“You’re not killing this Dazai as well! You’re deranged.”

“Chuuya darling, I might not be your Dazai but let’s not kid ourselves and act like that guy isn’t deranged.”

Chuuya forces a deep breath out of his lungs, clearly trying to remain civil. It’s almost romantic how some things never change, no matter which universe they are in. “I’m not talking with you about this,” he mutters. “Just… what else?”

Taking a sip of his coffee, he tilts his head this way and that. “It’s possible that it – this condition will simply resolve itself once I go to sleep. However, it’s also likely that it will happen again and again. You mentioned that your Dazai has been having issues with sleeping?”

“He’s been having these crazy vivid dreams,” Chuuya confirms with a nod. “I kept telling him to see a doctor about it but the stubborn idiot insisted it wasn’t a physical problem.”

“The stubborn idiot was right.” Dazai smiles. “I had those dreams too. They weren’t dreams though. They were memories.”

“Memories?”

“Of the other universes,” he elaborates. “You know, because of the book and all that? I presume the issue started sometime after you used the book?”

“Oh,” Chuuya says quietly. “Yeah. You’re right. It was right after we… yeah.”

Dazai gestures at him. “See? Memories. What I don’t understand is how it’s possible that I am currently here. I had vague memories of my other selves but never like this. I never *was* or *became* them.”

“And you’re dead,” Chuuya points out with a frown.

Dazai makes a face. “That too.”

“Maybe it’s because you’re dead.”

“Pardon me?”

“Think about it. You died in that other universe of yours. Isn’t it possible that your mind, spirit, soul or whatever else you choose to

believe in sought another body after that?"

"I died in a lot of other universes too." Dazai's index finger taps against his cup in concentration. "I never woke up as someone else though. Death is a natural cycle of life. Everyone dies at one point or another."

"You killed yourself," Chuuya mutters, nostrils flaring. "That's not part of life. That was you pulling the curtains close before the show was over."

Dostoevsky didn't give him a choice, he wants to say; he wants to explain why he broke his promise to Chuuya. But in the end, his words remain sealed inside the vault of his chest. It doesn't matter why he did it. He is still the same shade of dead. Still buried somewhere.

He takes another sip of the coffee. Clears his throat. "What we know for sure is that it has somehow happened because of the book."

"Right. You think we can use it to fix this?"

"That will just conjure another universe into existence," Dazai mutters. "But my Chuuya will still be out there thinking that I'm dead. Not a solution."

"But will it bring my Dazai back?" Chuuya snaps.

How funny. Chuuya doesn't care about his other self. Why should he? It's not like he will ever feel what the other one, the right one, does. Still. How funny. How sad.

"No," Dazai lies. "I highly doubt it."

The truth is that it might. He isn't going to settle for a band-aid that will only solve this Chuuya's problems though. Not if he has the chance to uphold his promise, after all.

"It's not the Book that I'm thinking about," he adds before Chuuya punches him again, "but the author."

"Natsume," Chuuya says.

Dazai tilts his head. "Correct. You knew he is behind the book?"

"We found out when we found the Book, remember?" Then Chuuya clicks his tongue, rubbing his brow. "Shit, that wasn't you. Right."

“I only know some very vague information about this world,” Dazai offers as his eyes slide around the kitchen, taking in the sharp details that he hadn’t been privy to before. “Bits and pieces. I tried to suppress as many memories as possible to keep my sanity somewhat intact.” He chuckles. “Chuuya would probably argue I wasn’t successful.”

He cringes. How dreadfully the mixture of guilt and longing taste in his mouth.

“I guess I can see how all that could drive someone insane,” this Chuuya murmurs, voice softened for the first time since he found out his boyfriend has been hijacked by an alien maniac. “So I – or other Chuuyas exist in the other universes too?”

“Oh, but of course. Wherever Dazai is, so is Chuuya. Heh, we’re like magnets that can’t stay away from each other.”

Chuuya frowns, bewildered. “And that other Chuuya’s in the Mafia too? With you?”

Dazai nods eagerly. Then falters. “Well, for a long time, he was the king of the sheep, but then I made him marry me –”

“Did you just say *marry you*?”

“What, never heard of an arranged marriage?”

“Not outside of novels and history.”

“Well, I guess I could have just made him join the Mafia the normal way.” Dazai shrugs. “But referring to each other as husband has a much nicer ring to it, don’t you think?”

“You really are deranged.” Chuuya takes a big gulp of his coffee before slamming the empty cup down on the counter. “But if you’re anything like my Dazai, I can imagine what made you that way.”

Dazai tips his head to the side, curious. “Such as?”

“Being born into the Mafia?”

“Ah, that.” So they do have more in common than he thought. “The apple doesn't fall far from the tree as it seems.”

“So I figure you became the boss then?”

“The one and only.”

“That means you never left the Mafia.”

“I did but only for a few months. I came back eventually.”

Chuuya’s chest falls with a sigh, eye wandering somewhere that Dazai can’t follow.

“So Natsume.”

Right.

Chuuya here is antsy to get his Dazai back.

“You don’t happen to know where he is?” he says, hoping even though he should know better.

Chuuya shakes his head. Yeah. What a dangerous little thing that hope. “We never bothered to find him once we had the book.”

“Well, he isn’t exactly easy to track.”

“Even when you’ve got all of the Mafia’s resources?”

“Unfortunately, even then,” Dazai says, “but it is our only hope, so.”

“Not exactly. There is something else.” Chuuya folds his arms over his chest, a satisfied glint filling his gaze. “Well, someone else.”

Dazai gestures at him to go on.

“Oda Sakunosuke. That name tell you anything?”

***

“Do I look evil?”

They are still in the kitchen. An hour has passed since their rude awakening but, at least, they have a plan now. Well, they *will* have one depending on the outcome of the next ten minutes.

Across the table, Chuuya’s permanent frown, if possible, deepens even more as he looks at Dazai. “What’s your deal?”

“Why do I have to have some kind of deal?” Dazai shoots back. “Perhaps I just want to know whether I look friendly and not like a

big villainy Mafia boss that people hate at first glance."

"I'm a Mafia boss and I don't look villainy," Chuuya points out with an arched brow.

"But you're –" Dazai cuts off his own reply when he hears the door open somewhere in the apartment, followed by low murmurs and voices – awfully familiar ones. Gulping down his nerves, he drives his fingers through his hair again. Acting natural is always his go-to response in fickle situations but what does that even mean under these specific circumstances? Acting like himself will be suspicious. So will acting like the Dazai that these people know. In the end, he settles on something in between: he draws his mouth into a faint half-smile, lest he scares anyone away.

A moment later, the guests appear in the doorway. Yosano takes the lead, looking over her shoulder as she talks to someone. Not just someone but Oda. Odasaku.

Dazai grips his cup of coffee a little tighter.

Just as their eyes land on him, a third person shuffles after them and Dazai's smile, no matter how small, slides off his face.

"What's wrong with him?" Fyodor Dostoevsky – Fyodor fucking Dostoevsky – asks with a nod at him.

Yosano comes to a stop and plants her hands on her hips as she, head tilted, searches for the wrongness that the rat just pointed out. "What *is* wrong with you?"

"It's the clothes," Oda says then, his gaze on him just as intense as the other one's but it's… curious, not hostile. Friendly. Amused even.

"No, it's more than just the clothes," Yosano retorts and takes a step closer to inspect Dazai. "Your expression. No, your posture? The vibes are off. Can you say something?"

"Will you stop treating him like a zoo animal," Chuuya mutters first before shooting him a look. "I'll tell them."

Dazai shrugs. It probably is best if they hear it from someone they trust.

"Tell us what?"

“He’s a Dazai from another universe.”

Now Dazai cranks up the wattage. “Surprise!”

The revelation leads to a thick, nervous silence as the three people stare at him with three different shades of bewildered surprise. Dostoevsky, of course, looks more fascinated than anything, stroking his chin with the curiosity of a bored scientist who has finally come face to face with a problem that is complicated enough to capture his attention.

Yosano is the first one to speak. “How?”

“Is our Dazai somewhere here too?” Dostoevsky asks next.

Odasaku continues to look at him like he is trying to process this information.

Dazai glances at Chuuya. “Do you want to explain it or should I?”

“Go ahead,” is the wry answer.

So Dazai summarizes everything from a rough outline of his actual life to waking up here to this present moment, skipping over certain details such as his death or the fact that Dostoevsky was responsible for it.

He hasn’t decided yet what to do about this Dostoevsky. It takes all the discipline that his father once trained into him not to reveal the circumstances of his death to everyone in the room, watch as Dostoevsky’s ‘friends’ start looking at him with distrust and hatred in their eyes – the same way that Oda looked at him the last time they talked in their own universe. But rationalism tells Dazai that every world is different. That means that this Dostoevsky might actually be a decent human being. He has to be if he is part of Chuuya’s inner circle. He can be a manipulative rat but Chuuya has good instincts. He would see through him. That conclusion only leaves Dazai with two options for now: patience and observation.

After he has shared his dreadful tale of woe, another long silence descends over the room. Their surprise smells different this time. Their question marks have turned from *what* to *how do we fix this?*

“What an uncanny situation you’ve found yourself in,” Dostoevsky murmurs.

Dazai meets his intense gaze with a hollow smile plastered to his lips.

Yosano's frown wanders between Dazai and Chuuya before she shakes her head. "I'll need a drink to process all that."

With a grunt, Chuuya gets to his feet.

"Oda," Dazai says, forcing himself to keep the -saku to himself when he turns to the man. "Chuuya told me that you've met Natsume before. He left you the key to the book. You don't happen to know how to contact him?"

He shakes his head. "I was fourteen the last time I talked to him. I haven't seen him since. But…"

Dazai raises his brow. "But?"

"My few encounters with him all took place at a particular café. I stopped visiting but maybe he didn't."

"It's worth a shot," he decides. "If we don't find him there, we can pay a visit to that house in the desert where you found the book."

"And if you don't find Natsume?" Dostoevsky questions, leisurely stirring his tea with a spoon.

"That's not an option," Chuuya says behind him. Dazai lifts his head to him. His expression is tight as he leans against the counter. His entire body is stiff with nerves. He has done a good job at keeping it together so far but the fact is that Dazai is occupying the body of the person that he loves.

Chuuya does not deal well when the people he loves are under threat.

Yosano squeezes Chuuya's arm, knowing this as well. Everyone in the room probably does because they are his friends. Chuuya's friends. And the other Dazai's as well.

It's ironic. In Dazai's universe, this constellation of people in the same room would cause the next Great War. In this one, they could end one.

To think that the mere flap of a butterfly's wings is enough to cause such a drastic difference…

Chuuya doesn't let his emotions linger for long though. After another tense exhale, he pushes away from the counter and starts giving out orders, making calls, arranging surveillance battalions — turning his

fear into productivity.

He makes an exceptional leader.

***

Five hours later, Dazai has exiled himself to the library in this Chuuya's penthouse, a lovely room filled with rows of bookshelves and the scent of stories and knowledge. He should build one in his world too. He would hide out there while Chuuya's busy running the underworld, then lure Chuuya to him to continue his writing and reading lessons and kiss him on the floor. If he ever comes back, that is.

Each hour that passes diminishes the likelihood of that happening more and more. So far, Chuuya and his team of misfits had no success in locating Natsume. The cafe that Odasaku mentioned is now under constant surveillance but it's a long shot. Long shots is all they have though.

Just as bad is the fact that Chuuya decided to put Dostoevsky on the fake-Dazai-watch while he is at the Port Mafia base. He isn't aware of the other Dostoevsky's crimes, of course, but still. Couldn't he have asked Yosano or Odasaku? No, it had to be the rat that looks at Dazai like a child in a candy store. Hence, the voluntary library exile.

But it's only a matter of time until Dostoevsky finds him and it happens sooner than Dazai prefers.

He is stretched out on the carpet when the shadow of a rodent falls over him. He doesn't need to raise his gaze to know that it's him.

"So," Fyodor Dostoevsky says without any preamble, "how did you die?"

Dazai flips to the next page of his book. "Take a wild guess."

"Oh, you're kidding. Me?" The amused but honest astonishment on his face makes Dazai raise his brows. Surely the rat cannot be that different.

"That surprises you?"

"No, but it is funny, don't you think?" Dostoevsky gestures between them as he takes a seat on the couch, always needing to be above him. "I kill you and you end up here of all places."

“You and I have different ideas of funny.”

Falling down 33 stories was the opposite of that.

Dostoevsky’s lips curl around an aberrant grin as he sweeps his gaze over the entire length of Dazai’s body with that look again. “Hm, then again, you are not truly dead, are you?”

“Don’t bother asking,” Dazai says dryly, returning his eyes to the text. “I don’t have the answer.”

“Do you even want to go back?“ Dostoevsky belittles his silence with a snicker. “Don’t pretend. I see the way you look at these people. A part of you wants to settle down.”

Dazai shakes his head. “I don’t belong here.”

What he longs for is not this universe but its simplicity. Maybe the people who live here would disagree but the brushstrokes of this world aren’t as brutal and as hard as the ones that he left behind. They seem gentler. Kinder. Despite the visible scars marking Chuuya’s skin, his one eye is brighter than ever. He has friends. *Dazai* has friends. They have each other.

He doesn’t want to settle down here. It would never be real. He just wants to know what it’s like to wake up without the taste of dread in his mouth. Live - he wants to live.

“Tell me about that world of yours. I’ll help you,” Dostoevsky says.

That declaration is just as absurd as Dazai’s thoughts.

“I don’t want your help.” The only thing he will get out of it is a knife in the back.

“But you need it.”

“I beg to differ.”

Dostoevsky’s eyes flick to the ceiling before seizing him. “Just accept it or Chuuya’s mood will kill us all.”

“For Chuuya, huh?” Dazai’s mouth twists into a mocking smile. He dislikes how easy those words roll off Dostoevsky's tongue. How honest they sound. He dislikes everything about this conversation. “You better not think that you can rope him into that throuple thing you’ve got going on. I may not be the right Dazai but that doesn’t

mean I won't protect his boyfriend from your slimy hands."

"I've already had my hands all over your Chuuya."

Dazai's too late to school his reaction. His jaw muscles twitch violently. It sounds so wrong. It looks even worse in his head when he pictures it. Dostoevsky and Chuuya. His Chuuya. No matter which universe he is a part of. "And he still chose Dazai," he makes himself say.

"The real Dazai that you are currently holding hostage," Dostoevsky points out as though Dazai needs the reminder. "Do you want to fix this or not?"

He does. He wants these people to stop looking at him as the intruder. More than that, he wants to find a way back to his own Chuuya and beg for his forgiveness.

"You go first then," Dazai challenges. If Dostoevsky insists on helping, whatever that may look like, he can go ahead and make the first step. "Tell me your secrets and maybe I'll share mine."

To his utter surprise, Dostoevsky sighs and says, "Okay."

The main difference, Dazai decides over the next hour of listening, is that this Dostoevsky lived without an ability up until recently. It had been taken from him when he was just a kid — and with the help of the other Dazai's blood, no less — so he came to Yokohama to find the Book and get it back. A very complicated tale but the gist of it is that Dostoevsky didn't have anything to numb his feelings for the better part of his life. It explains his unusual sanity *and* his willingness to help Dazai.

As interesting as it is to compare this Dostoevsky to his nefarious counterpart though, it doesn't offer any solutions to Dazai's predicament. The Book that Dostoevsky used to regain his ability can't help him traverse universes. The only piece of information that catches his interest is the place where this world's Chuuya and his friends found the key, a missing page, to the Book: an uncanny, little house in the desert that is known to spit out strange, borderline alien objects.

He glances down at the physics text book and traces the binding with his finger as Dostoevsky drones on and on in the background. If Dazai is right, then it's where the walls between worlds are thinnest.

It's worth taking a look at.

***

One and a half long hours later, someone else takes over the fake-Dazai-watch.

Oda.

Despite the friendly encounter they had earlier, Dazai still braces himself for animosity and hostility. After all, this Oda is friends with the other Dazai. Not him. Instead Oda beckons him into the kitchen and raises a plastic bag that's carrying food.

"Do you want something to eat? I brought curry."

Dazai's appetite has been missing but he can't bring himself to decline that offer. "Sure. Thanks."

Oda nods and starts unpacking the boxes in silence. Dazai watches him move, trying to figure out whether it's someone he knows or whether he is deluding himself once again.

Maybe a little too hard because when Oda places his bowl in front of him, he asks, "Did we know each other in your universe?"

Startled by the question, Dazai has to think about his words. About the truth and whether it is worth telling or better to keep to himself.

"You obviously know Chuuya," Oda adds, taking a seat on the other side of the table. "And Fyodor from what I've heard."

Huh. Dostoevsky told him about their conversation? How interesting. How *open* of him.

It is surprising enough to spark a burst of courage from him.

"I knew all of you." Dazai carefully picks up his chopsticks before risking a glance in Oda's direction. "But we weren't close, not as you are. You worked for the Agency, and I was the leader of the Port Mafia." He shrugs. "I'm sure you can imagine how that didn't create a good foundation for a friendship."

"The Agency?"

Oh, right.

That is not a thing in this world.

“A Detective Agency made up of a bunch of clever and strong people, most of them ability users. The dusk to the Mafia’s night, if you will.”

Oda hums around the curry in his mouth before swallowing. “And I worked for it?”

“Yes. You were good at it too.”

“I thought we weren’t close.”

Dazai’s eyes fall to his plate, a sheepish smile tugging at his lips. “Observant as always, Odasaku.” He doesn’t get a reply to that. It is his turn to speak. “My world isn’t the only world that I remember. Back then – when I was still me and alive, I remembered the other worlds as well. Parts of it.” His gaze slowly slides up to Oda. “I remembered who my friends were.”

“That’s a lot of things to remember,” Oda says after a moment of deep contemplation – or maybe none at all if Dazai remembers correctly. What you see with Odasaku, is what you get. He is simple like that. Special that way too.

Dazai just shrugs, not really sure what to say and too tired to come up with something eloquent either.

They eat the rest of their food in silence.

It’s only after Odasaku gets up to put his plate away that the question bursts out of Dazai. “Are you happy here?”

Oda’s brows lift high on his forehead before he cracks an amused smile. “That’s a very open question.” He turns to the dishwasher. “It’s not always easy but it’s a good life. A life like any.”

He seems happy. He has friends who care about him. He has Yosano and — Dazai might never understand what Oda could possibly see in someone like Dostoevsky but he does see that it hasn’t made Oda unhappy, so there is that.

“Do you write?”

That makes Oda pause. A flash of horror flickers across his face. “It’s complicated.”

A laugh escapes Dazai. “How so?”

“We’re still searching for a publisher.”

“We?”

“You and me. The –”

“The other Dazai, yeah. I get it.”

“You studied literature and you insisted on helping me, so it just made sense.”

Dazai scoffs a little. “He can’t be too good at it if you’re still searching. One snap of my fingers and I’d get you the best deal of the century.”

“You tried doing that,” Oda tells him with a faint smile. “I’m the one who wants to do this the right way.”

“Oh… well, I’m sure you will find the right publisher eventually.”

Oda agrees with a nod, then digs back into his curry.

It’s a quiet lunch. Oda asks a few more questions about Dazai’s universe, interested but not engrossed by every detail he hears like Dostoevsky was. No, to him, it’s like listening to someone tell a story — a very entertaining and dramatic story but a story nonetheless.

Dazai used to view the memories in his head similarly. Stories. It’s easier on the mind than accepting the fact that there is an infinite number of universes out there, all with their own Dazais and their own Chuuyas and their own worlds and problems and thoughts. It’s just too much.

But now Dazai is here and he cannot pretend anymore.

The people here are not stories. They are as real as the sun in the sky and the ants on the sidewalk.

When he finishes his bowl, he lifts his head. “Oda? Do me a favor and stay at home on November 19th in three years. Don’t answer any calls. Don’t go anywhere. Just… stay home.”

They are real and in this one universe, Dazai has the chance to save Oda and make the burden of all this knowledge hurt a little less.

Oda’s forehead creases with questions. But he doesn’t utter them. He probably already knows the answer to them. “Okay,” he says and that is it.

***

When Dazai wakes up the next morning, exiled to the living room couch, the first thing that he sees is Chuuya standing over him. The grim hopeful spark in his gaze almost tempts Dazai to lie. To pretend.

But lies have short legs and this Chuuya would catch him before Dazai would even have time to try to run away. So the truth it is.

“Sorry,” he says. “Still not your Dazai.”

Just like that, the glimmer in Chuuya’s eye flickers out, replaced by a desperate frustration that he keeps to himself. “Then we have work to do,” is all he tells Dazai before walking away.

Dazai asks Chuuya to take him to the house in the dessert over breakfast. Seeing as there have been no sightings of Natsume nor any other leads, he eventually agrees, and together they set out.

It’s an awkward helicopter ride to say the least.

Chuuya hates him. Loathes him. Dazai is sure of it. These aren’t just Chuuya’s typical grievances with him either; he would kill him in an instant if that got him his Dazai back — that is how much he can’t stand Dazai. But he can’t kill him while he is in his boyfriend’s body, so he tolerates him in simmering silence.

It doesn’t get better when they reach that quaint desert house.

Dazai isn’t sure what he expected to find. A magical portal that will lead him back to his Chuuya? An instruction manual? Natsume? But he anticipated *something*. A clue, no matter how tiny. Not just shelves that hang on the walls, their surfaces covered in dust, a rickety wooden bench in the corner, and a startling number of books scattered all over. On the shelves. On the floor. In bags. On every surface imaginable. Not all this useless crap that brings him nowhere closer to home.

“Now what?” Chuuya says, evidently caught up in the same nauseating whirlwind of hope and crushing disappointment.

Dazai doesn’t turn to him. Doesn’t want to face the animosity in his gaze. “I don’t know.” Helplessly, he looks around, searching for a lifeline but only meeting insurmountable walls. “Maybe one of these books —”

“Screw reading useless shit,” Chuuya snaps, slapping a book out of Dazai’s hand. His fingers clench into fists. “This is another dead-end. You don’t know what the hell you’re doing. Admit it.”

“What’s the point of that?”

“Admit it.”

“Fine!” Dazai throws up his hands. “I don’t know what the hell I am doing. How should I? No one ever taught me what to do when you suddenly find yourself in the body of another you! I sincerely apologize for not predicting this and coming up with a plan in advance!”

“This isn’t fucking funny. This is my life. *His* life.”

“I’m not laughing,” Dazai spits back. “And you’re sorely mistaken if you think I want to be stuck here with someone so moody who hates me! I want to go back to *my* Chuuya too! I want —” His voice teeters dangerously and his mouth clamps shut. He swallows all these dreadful emotions, buries them somewhere deep and dark, and takes a step back, distancing himself. “I’m going to look through the books to see if they do contain something even remotely useful and you’re either going to help or wait outside. Your choice.”

“I hate you,” Chuuya mutters. “I hate this.”

“So wait outside.”

“No fucking way. I’m helping.”

Of course he is.

They work in a silence that isn’t charged with unspoken accusations anymore but isn’t friendly either. Most of the books Dazai picks up are useless. Only a few seem like they could be relevant — extremely vaguely relevant. As he already said: long shots are all they have.

They’re leaving, Chuuya leading the way back to the helicopter, when Dazai slides his hands into the pocket of his coat with a sigh and pauses. He grasps something round. Something cold. Blinking, he lifts the object to his eyes.

His brows furrow.

The compass?

It doesn't make any sense. Dazai's mind somehow crossed universes but his body didn't, so his belongings should not have either. Then again, the compass is not just any item. It's special. Dazai paid a hefty sum to acquire it at the auction and abilities do not always follow any rules of logic.

It doesn't have any cardinal directions. Just a needle that points toward its counterpart. The ring.

Following it, he steps out of the door and into the desert.

The needle does an 180.

Dazai spins back around but there is only the house. Of course. The compass is directing him toward Chuuya, who is in another universe, and this house — it's the closest place to that other universe.

His throat is dry when he swallows. It's not because of the sand in the air.

He told Chuuya to follow the ring. Does that mean that he is out there somewhere, frantically searching a similar house somewhere on the other side? Cursing Dazai for sending him on a wild goose chase? Chuuya can turn the entire world on its head and still not find Dazai because Dazai is not *there*. He is —

He is not there.

He is trapped here and he doesn't fucking know how to get back.

***

The days that follow whittle down Dazai's hope, piece by piece. Worse perhaps than being stuck somewhere without a way out is being stuck somewhere he does not belong. It's not his world, not his friends, not his Chuuya and not even his own body. Similar but different. A dupe. And the four people around him know that. He sees it in their faces every morning – the reflexive shadow of resentment when Dazai tells him that he is still the wrong one and not theirs.

Because for as long as Dazai is stuck here, their Dazai is imprisoned in his own body, forced to share it with a stranger.

The only one who doesn't seem to mind his being here is, ironically enough, Dostoevsky. Partly because, from what Dazai has gathered, he sees the original Dazai of this world as nothing more than an

annoying brat and partly because this phenomenon fascinates him more than anything. Not surprising, considering his obsession with the Book. Though in this universe, that complex of his has translated into more of a side-hobby than a crusade. The people that Dazai left behind weren't so lucky.

A week passes without any results. Natsume could be dead, for all they know – if that is even possible. Or he could be lazing under the sun somewhere, one cat among hundreds of thousands of them in Yokohama, just as impossible to find. That didn't stop Chuuya from rambling about creating a Mafia task force whose sole aim it would be to pick up each and every calico cat in the city and coax Natsume out.

Dazai spends most of his time either holed up in Chuuya's library or at the Port Mafia headquarters, using their resources to research the Book, interdimensional travel and other rabbit holes that lead him in all kinds of directions but home. He stays out of Chuuya's way as much as possible. It hurts him to see the wrong Dazai walk around in his boyfriend's body even though he doesn't say it. Dazai doesn't say it either but seeing Chuuya, so remarkably similar yet entirely different, hurts too.

He misses Chuuya. His Chuuya.

He misses his dry replies and flat stares. Misses that concern in his eyes that he always tries and fails to hide underneath big, scary glares. Misses talking to him late at night. Misses his body, always so solid and unyielding. Dazai felt like he could lean on him for anything and never fall. Misses the awkward smiles he doesn't want anyone to see. Misses watching him play with Jiji and Kafka. Misses the two creatures too. Misses, most of all, just his presence, being in the same room as him even when they aren't talking but simply working side by side.

For the better part of his life, Dazai was convinced he wasn't a people person. Spending time with others sucks the energy out of him. All the talking, the fake smiles, the effort it requires to be alert and keep every twitch of his face and his body under control, constantly being in two places at the same time – it's exhausting.

But Chuuya…

God, Chuuya does the opposite to him. Dazai blooms like a flower under the sun in his presence. Or like a Lily of the Valley in the shadow if he is going to get the metaphors correct. Whether it's the

simple fact that Dazai likes him more than anyone else or whether it's that thread that connects them no matter in which universe they are or something entirely else that Dazai hasn't thought of yet, the point is that being around his Chuuya doesn't wear him out and this is the first time since that day in the chapel, that they have even spent so long apart…

Dazai feels something inside of him wither and wane.

Dazai misses him like a lung and seeing another Chuuya, less alone one that despises him, doesn't help.

So they stay out of each other's way as much as they can. One night, they happen to find themselves alone in the penthouse though, the other three musketeers busy with work or each other or something. The smart thing would be to retreat to the library and stay there until the sun rises. The problem, however, is that Dazai's stomach is growling like it's possessed and the kitchen is occupied.

Dazai should have stored snacks between the bookshelves. Rookie mistake.

He ignores his little issue for an hour, hoping that Chuuya will retreat at some point as well.

No such luck.

When Dazai eventually gives up and ventures outside, he realizes why: Chuuya is several glasses deep into a bottle of wine, his one eye bloodshot and glassy from drunken frustration when it lifts to Dazai.

"I just," he clears his throat and nods at the fridge, "need a snack."

Chuuya says nothing, but his gaze follows every step that Dazai takes toward his destination and remains glued to his back as he scans the contents. *La-la-la-la,* he sings to himself to ignore the way his stomach twists in discomfort rather than hunger. *I hate this very much. I should have just let Dostoevsky burn the world down. It would have been more pleasant than this.*

He ends up snatching a prepackaged salad that doesn't look too appealing but doesn't require any further preparation and turns on his heels to make a quick escape.

"Stop."

Squeezing his eyes shut, Dazai does not stop. He didn't hear anything. His hunger has made him deaf!

"Oi, *stop*," Chuuya calls after him and this time, Dazai's feet comply.

He plasters a blank smile on his face before looking over his shoulder. "Hm?"

"You don't have to avoid me," Chuuya mutters, rolling his eye. "I'm not going to bite."

Dazai breathes out a laugh. "I'm not avoiding you."

Chuuya replies with a flat stare and Dazai's chest sinks. Oh, how he misses that. Reluctantly, he takes a few steps toward him. "Maybe you're not going to bite me but I know that you can't stand the sight of me. We don't have to pretend otherwise."

"I don't hate you. I just…" Chuuya raises the glass in his hand only to uselessly lower it again with a full body sigh. "I just wish you weren't here and that my Dazai was."

Isn't that the same?

"But that doesn't mean you've got to eat that shit in your hands when there's warm food on the stove," Chuuya adds before Dazai has a chance to reply. He motions behind Dazai. "Grab a plate and eat. "

Dazai considers his pathetic salad, considers Chuuya and lets out a breath before doing as he was told. The tempura is not only still warm but smells great. Tastes just as good, once he takes a seat at the table and shoves a piece into his mouth with a hum. Chuuya watches him eat with the scrutinizing frown of an owner watching his dog eat. Well, Dazai is in his boyfriend's body. He supposes Chuuya considers it his personal duty to maintain this body's health in the meantime.

"It's good," Dazai tells him after a few minutes.

Chuuya acknowledges that with a thin half-smile.

Dazai lowers his gaze to his plate.

"I don't even know where he is," Chuuya says then, his voice not more than whisper but his words louder than a scream. "You know what happened to you but my Dazai doesn't. He simply *vanished."*

"He's a clever one if you haven't noticed," Dazai replies with a faint

grin and waggles his brows. “Not exactly easy to get rid of. Like a cockroach. He’s probably fine.”

Chuuya huffs before scrubbing a hand over his face. “Yeah.”

Not knowing how to fix this problem, Dazai utters the first thing that comes to his mind. “Do you want me to pretend to be him?”

Many people make the mistake of assuming that someone as seemingly brilliant as Dazai would have no stupid thoughts. That’s not true. It’s the complete opposite. He seems all-knowing *because* he thinks about his words. All the time. So when he, on occasion, doesn’t go through the tedious process of picking apart each and every syllable that will come out of him, the results are less than satisfactory.

Chuuya stares at him. “What?”

But backing down would only make it more obvious. Dazai doubles down instead by shrugging nonchalantly, acting like this absurd suggestion is the most natural thing in the world.

“No,” Chuuya snaps with a horrified scowl. “Why would I want that?!”

“You miss him.”

“Of course I do, but a shitty performance won’t bring him back.”

“I’m a good actor!” Dazai’s grin leaves the other man unfazed, so Dazai has no choice but to put on a live demonstration. He recalls the memories he possesses of that other Dazai, pieces of his life and his personality that slipped through the seal that Dazai keeps around that massive boulder of knowledge. The other Dazai is… older but he acts younger. Like a pampered brat. Probably because he is one. This Chuuya spoils him like crazy. The other Dazai is also a literature student — or was, Dazai’s not sure about the timeline.

Then, he stretches out one arm over the table to catch Chuuya’s attention, making his voice high and dainty. “Chuuuya, stop ignoring me. I know you want it.”

Chuuya’s eye twitches, his inhale sharper than his exhale. “This isn’t funny.”

“Isn’t it?” Dazai pulls his legs up onto his chair and channels the

energy of an annoying man-child. “I think it’s funny. By the way, want to read some books together? Get off on fairy smut?”

“Oh, fuck off.”

“How *do* you get off on fairy smut?” Dazai asks, breaking character with a snort. “Surely there’s better porn out there.”

“That’s none of your goddamn business.” There is no heat in Chuuya’s tone when he stands up, his empty dishes trailing after him in the air. After he loads them into the dishwater, he shoots Dazai an accusatory frown. “How do you even know that? I thought your memories were flimsy as shit.”

Dazai stretches his arms above his head before meeting his gaze. “They are. Some details, unfortunately, slip through now and then. Trust me, I don’t want to know these things either.”

“What else?” Chuuya asks, grabbing a glass from the cupboard.

“Hmm.” Dazai touches the corner of his mouth, thinking. Wading through a thousand tiny memories isn’t an easy task. Some of them seem like they fit into this world without actually belonging to it. He has to connect to them information that has gathered here first. “I know that you sent your Dazai away to protect him."

Sitting back down, Chuuya’s mouth presses into a tight smile at that. “Yeah. Big mistake.” Then he pours more wine into his and the second glass and slides the latter toward Dazai.

Dazai accepts it with a small shrug. “You wanted to keep him safe. I get it.”

“You do?” Chuuya’s brows rise in surprise.

“I understand your intention. And you were right. The Mafia’s not a good place for me.”

All Dazai wanted was to escape the tower in his world so how can he blame Chuuya for wanting to save his Dazai all that misery? And that Dazai knew it, he is sure of it. His issue was about having a choice.

A choice that his Chuuya wanted to spare him of making, too, yet in the end, it was Dazai who robbed him of his.

“What?” Chuuya wants to know when Dazai disappears inside his

head for too long.

Dazai isn't particularly interested in diving into this topic now, so he searches for something else. But the memories that come to him, while being from this universe, don't seem to have happened yet. Future memories. These are probably best kept under lock. Dazai has already caused enough disturbance. He doesn't need to mess around with their timeline as well… with the exception of Odasaku. If he has the chance to save him in this life, he will use it. "I know that you were Akutagawa's mentor," Dazai finally retorts. Something easy. "Probably for the best. I know that you had a thing with Dostoevsky once." Something terrible.

"For several months actually," Chuuya says with an amused smirk.

Watching him take a sip of his wine, Dazai makes a face, not bothering to hide the repulsion that fills his mouth. "That's disgusting, Chuuya."

At least, it makes Chuuya laugh, a hoarse, yet soft sound, easing the suffocating pressure of being stuck in the wrong flesh. Even if only for a heartbeat or two. He thinks this is the first time Chuuya has genuinely laughed since Dazai arrived here. Selfishly, he wants more.

"I know that I love you," he goes on, absently tracing the curve of his glass with his index finger. "In a really terribly pathetic way." Then his brows furrow. "He," Dazai corrects. "She. They. Whatever."

The other Dazai is… nonbinary? Something like that. This Dazai, however, has enough on his plate without dealing with such complicated issues as gender. He just wants to return to his Chuuya.

Chuuya's smile dims but not the light in his eye, a steady flame of devotion.

"What I don't know is how you got –" Swinging one leg over the other, Dazai leans closer to brush the tip of his thumb over the corruption marks on Chuuya's face, permanently etched into his skin. "— this."

He has theories. But no solid memories to draw on, for some reason.

Chuuya blinks before leaning back, his throat bobbing. "Corruption."

"Really?" Dazai mock-gasps and slaps a hand over his mouth.

“Shut up,” Chuuya grumbles and tosses a napkin at him, scowling when Dazai catches it. “I used it. I died. Yosano brought me back but corruption remained, killing me slowly instead of right away.”

“Ah. That’s why you needed the Book.”

A nod.

“Interesting.” Dazai gently kicks his shin under the table. “You shouldn’t use it without me, Chuuya. Really.”

“Trust me, lesson learned.” Chuuya drinks to that and so does Dazai before Chuuya’s attention shifts to him, making him squirm under the spotlight. “So what about you?”

“What about me?”

He’s stalling for time because the first thing that rises within him at that question is shame. Guilt. Here is Chuuya with his Dazai and even though both of them have been through equal amounts of hell, they made it. His Dazai didn’t jump off a building the first chance he got. His Dazai outlasted his weariness.

Dazai did not.

“What’s your Chuuya like?”

Dazai’s defenses deflate. His sharp twist of lips softens into something real, a mix of sadness and fondness as a current of memories sweep over him. Brutal but sweet like cold water. “He’s bitey and proud but also kind of awkward. Extremely tense. All the time. Carrying the entire weight of the world on his shoulders.” Dazai feels his smile fade.

“What?”

“I never got to give him a massage,” he says, frowning to himself. “He deserved one.”

“You’ll get to. Someday.”

They tell each other about their Dazais and Chuuyas like children trading whispered secrets once the lights turn off. It’s relieving. Dazai didn’t know how relieving until he starts talking about his Chuuya and is unable to stop, finally able to do something with all the memories and feelings that he has been holding within him. There is this

common belief that the person you're grieving is going to slip away for good when you reach this point, that you will lose them a second time, which is why so many struggle against it, but the truth is that they never *just* vanish. It only gets easier to breathe. That is all.

Chuuya feels the same. Dazai sees it from the way the tension in his shoulders lessens to the lop-sided smile that lights up his face when they settle in the living room and he recounts the time his Dazai went on a shopping spree with Chuuya's credit card. Yosano, Oda, and, unfortunately, even Dostoevsky are good friends to him but they have been skirting around mentioning the other Dazai in front of Chuuya, protecting him in their own way. But that's not what he needs. What he needs is a release.

It's a mixture of pushing Chuuya's buttons and the three glasses of wine that make Dazai ask, "Do you want to kiss?"

Chuuya's face twitches in surprise and disbelief before he shoves Dazai away with a huff. "I'm *not* a cheater."

"Oh, come on, this isn't cheating," he says through a sigh and pats his chest where the heat of the wine pools. "I am Dazai."

"But you're not *my* Dazai, so, yeah, it is fucking cheating."

Dazai hums. "I bet your Dazai wouldn't mind. I should know. We're the same. I'm just…" He blinks his heavy eyes open only to flash Chuuya a smirk. "Better."

Chuuya rolls his eye, very unimpressed. How rude. "Clearly you don't know," he mutters, stretching out on the length of the couch, one arm wound behind the back of his neck as he frowns at the ceiling. "My Dazai's the most jealous person I know."

"You know other people than Dazai?"

"Ha ha."

"I think both of them could be persuaded to be into it if they were here," Dazai muses aloud and pokes Chuuya in the foot, receiving a warning look in reply. His Chuuya has some exhibition tendencies. Though he is rather possessive, too.

"But they aren't."

Dazai's whole body sags a sigh. "No," he murmurs, resting his head,

“they aren’t.”

***

The next morning, Chuuya rattles him awake from a drunken coma-sleep, his face alight with feverish excitement.

Natsume has been spotted.

Chapter 44: Brave New World(s)

Chapter Notes

Warnings are at the end!!!! Take care and enjoy ＜3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Lesson 7: Roles

Don't just accept the roles that your people will force on you. You can reinvent yourself by creating a new identity, one that commands attention and never bores the audience. Be the master of your own image rather than letting others define it for you. And don't forget to incorporate a bit of drama into what you say and do. Your power will be amplified and your character will seem larger than life (｡•̀ᴗ-)✧

My role: the demon prodigy AND the heir (because I'm versatile like that)

Chuuya's role:

· *The king of the sheep à the king of the mafia?*

· *Something regarding his strength & power*

· *The knight of the Port Mafia = the knight of the night?* That sounds silly

· *The grieving husband?*

· *The mad boss #2?*

· *????*

· *Remains to be seen*

Chuuya isn't of any help to me in this matter, as always. He isn't even listening to what I'm saying ☹

***

A hand suddenly blocks his vision, forcing him to take his eyes off the notebook and to the executive staring expectantly down at him.

"You need to do something, boss," Kouyou says.

"Do what?" Chuuya narrows his eyes. "I've had all my meetings,

listened to every fucking question no matter how useless, and given all my orders. I'm done for the day."

"I'm not referring to completing a simple to-do list. I'm talking about the organization in general. It's been three weeks and people are getting restless." Kouyou raps one sharp fingernail against the desk, stressing the last word. *Restless.* Fucking restless. "You need to do something that will make you stand out as their leader, not just the man that resides in the office of the boss."

"Do they want me to throw a damn party or what?" Chuuya snaps, jumping to his feet. He is the one who should be restless, not them. He is the one confined to this office. This position that he didn't ask for. This life. But he is still doing his damn job, so why can't *they*? "I've taken over. That's it. It's not that hard to get."

To his utter horror, Kouyou strokes her chin as if she was actually considering his sarcastic suggestion. "A celebratory event could be a start."

"What? No fucking way."

"I agree that it would seem somewhat… inappropriate in light of the events that led you here, but my point still stands. You can't hide out behind paperwork for the rest of your time here. It's not enough."

"It was enough for Dazai."

"Dazai was not only an heir of the former boss but also the demon prodigy. He made a role for himself and he played it." Kouyou's eyes drill into him to make her point. "Knowingly."

Chuuya hates that she is right. Dazai tried to have this discussion while they were planning his fake death.

His fake fucking death – god, it sounds so absurd now.

Dazai tried to have this discussion but Chuuya shot him down every time. He hated the plan and everything about it, so he said that they could focus on these details afterward. Little did he know, there would never be one.

"I'm not a fucking actor," he says still. Dazai having the same idea doesn't make him right. Not all of his plans were perfect. The fact that he's buried in the ground is proof of that.

“None of us is, yet we all perform roles anyway,” Kouyou retorts so effortlessly that Chuuya wonders how she is not tired of playing politics yet. “Either you create your own image or someone else will for you – and the moment that happens you’ve already lost. My girls have already heard whispers that people are referring to you as the snake in Dazai’s garden.”

The snake in Dazai’s garden?

Chuuya lets out a humorless laugh. “So let ‘em…”

Maybe the Port Mafia will take offense to his leadership and try to replace him.

Let. Them.

Kouyou, once again, flicks her fingers, unfazed by his apathy. “We can use that if you want to. It will paint you as a treacherous, deceptive right-hand man but it will also make you seem powerful. Cunning.”

Chuuya shakes his head before he can stop himself. A part of him wants this all to end – and another part of him can’t bear the thought of tarnishing his relationship to Dazai like that. Even if it’s just to fluff up his own image.

He wasn’t some fucking snake to Dazai. He never even wanted to be here.

“No,” he says through gritted teeth. “What else?”

Kouyou pauses, showing the barest flicker of reluctance before she speaks. “I was thinking the man of the people.” She gestures toward him. “You’re not an heir like Dazai was. You come from a humble background, just like the majority of the people who work for you. They can relate to that. You, more or less, worked your way up through hard work.”

“But I didn’t. That was all Dazai,” Chuuya points out.

“The people don’t need to know that. What matters is that they see that you’re strong and that you’re not above getting your hands dirty on the battlefield. You’re one of them. You belong to them, and so, they belong to you.” She lets the novelty of this picture dry for a moment; then she adds: “That role, however, is also a narrow line to walk. You cannot make yourself too familiar with your people or else they will lose their fear and respect. You will have to tread lightly.

Play the role authentically but do not actually become it."

Chuuya crosses his arms with a scoff. "Wow. I'll just pretend to care?"

"Of course, you will care, Chuuya-kun. Every boss does. Even tyrants can be leaders who just want the best for their people. But care too much and you will have nothing left eventually."

Another pause.

"Being a man of the people also means you will not tolerate any threats from outsiders. You protect them." Her pointed look tells him to read between the lives. "No matter what it takes."

His jaw clenches. "I would protect them from Dostoevsky if we could fucking find him."

"We don't know where he is. Yet. We do know where his pawns are that he could use at any time to make a move against you."

"You mean the kill switch," Chuuya guesses, his words coming out in a breathless huff.

Months later and she is still talking about that damn kill button.

He can't deny that he didn't entertain the idea more than a couple of times. It would feel so good, so fucking right to take out the Bishop's Staff, the people who orchestrated the death of his friends, who wanted to capture and study him like an animal, who helped the man that killed Dazai, once and for all. All it would take is to push one fucking button. That's it.

Then, every time, he thinks about the collateral damage their deaths would cause. The people who would become collateral damage. Innocent people. Civilians. Kids, just like the Sheep.

He thinks about the people who carry those eye implants. Not all of them knew what they were signing up for when they joined that wretched organization. De Luca didn't.

"It would be the perfect spectacle to christen your new role," Kouyou says. Casually. Like they aren't talking about killing hundreds all at once.

"How many innocent people have to die for that?"

"How many of your people have been killed by them?" she shoots

back.

Chuuya rubs his temple, feeling a headache building in the back of his skull. “I need time to think.”

Straightening her shoulders and plastering a dutiful smile onto her face, Kouyou shoots him one last look. “Don’t take too long.”

***

“On today’s news: The National Diet has started drafting a new bill that aims to reign in the surge of ability-related conflicts in the country. The proposed bill, tentatively called the Yokohama Protection Act, seeks to restrict the use of abilities outside of designated areas and specific purposes to protect civilians.

“According to sources, the proposed bill would require the wearing of wristbands that are specifically designed to measure a person’s ability usage, as well as regular physical and mental assessments. It would set strict limits on the application of abilities and implement penalties for those who violate these limits.

“The bill has garnered support from human rights groups and lawmakers alike. ‘We need to take immediate action to protect our country and combat dangerous organizations and criminals,’ said Fumio Kishida, the president of the Liberal Democratic Party of Japan. ‘This bill is a crucial step towards holding people accountable for their actions and protecting people without any abilities.’

The bill is still in the early stages of drafting, and it is unclear when it will be introduced to the National Diet for debate and vote. However, its proposal signals a renewed commitment by the government to address the rising –”

The TV turns black. Chuuya tosses the remote aside and rises to his feet.

“What a bunch of idiots,” Albatross mutters.

“What’s so wrong with regulating y’all?” Shirase shoots back. “They’re not wrong. Every time an ability user throws a temper tantrum, ten civilians become collateral.”

“What’s wrong is that they’re hypocrites. Do you think they’ll force diet members to wear those glorified ankle monitors?”

“Why not?”

“Bro, use your brain.”

“Bro, I am. They’re public figures. It’d set a bad example if they didn’t.”

“You’re seeing this too simply. This is just…”

Blending out the arguing voices of his people, Chuuya looks out of the window. Shirase’s not wrong. Innocent people become collateral damage way too often. Fuck knows, Chuuya’s the prime example of this. But Albatross has a point too. Pretty fucking ironic of the government to suddenly act in the interest of the public when they were the ones to create monstrosities like Arahabaki in the first place. So they will force a bunch of people – civilians too, mind you – to wear those wristbands, and then what? Will they get punished each time they use something that belongs to them too many times even if they didn’t cause any harm? Will they get punished for defending themselves when ability users from the underworld – ability users who won’t have to wear anything because they officially don’t exist – exploit that weakness?

As the boss of the Port Mafia, this should come as a good thing, but Chuuya would be an idiot to miss the implication of such a bill. Port Mafia and other organizations with ability-user permits will be next.

Even that, though, is something he can live with. This is a crime syndicate. Dealing with law enforcement trying to get rid of them because they don’t know better is part of the program. What he can’t live with is the fact that this is the work of the Bishop’s Staff.

When Dazai fell, so did they. Publically, at least. Dazai was right to predict that his death would lead to an *official* end of their organization. Word on the street is that they collapsed without their ‘leader.’ A bunch of followers without their god. What Dazai failed to foresee was that his death would make him a martyr. The Bishop’s Staff doesn’t act as one entity anymore but as a dozen different smaller factions, all of which want to avenge him.

What’s even worse is their impact on the public. Their delusions have infected the masses. Abilities are the root of all evil. Getting rid of them will apparently solve every problem in the world. There’ll be no more wars, no more conflicts, no more deaths. Even poverty is somehow the fault of ability users.

It's a joke.

It's as if everyone has conveniently chosen to forget that people have always been capable of committing terrible things – with or without powers. The people who kept Chuuya and Dazai locked up in a laboratory like rats didn't have any abilities. Where are their wristbands? Where is public outrage against *them*?

Just then, the device in Chuuya's ear comes to life. The guards outside the office inform him that the team he sent to deal with an issue at the docks is here to deliver their report. Albatross gets up, stretches, and takes his position behind Chuuya without a word, knowing the drill. Shirase follows too, albeit complaining about it.

"Why do I have to stand behind you? I don't even *work* here."

If it was up to Chuuya, he would prefer his friends to remain sitting as well. He doesn't need anybody to protect him. Doesn't enjoy showcasing that they are his subordinates and he is their superior. It makes him feel like an imposter. But Kouyou insists that appearances are crucial, and it's easier to swallow his reservations than listen to another damn lecture.

"Hanging around the boss comes with a price," Albatross quips back. "Even for whiny civilians."

"It's always about you, huh." A finger pokes him in the back of his head. "Chuuya, Chuuya, Chuuya. We live in a Chuuya-centric world."

Chuuya only shoots Shirase a dry scowl. Shirase is one of the few people who treat him not like the boss of the Port Mafia or like someone who will go mad with grief any moment, but like the confused child who didn't know what a piece of bread was years ago. Shirase has a couple of brow-raising qualities; this one, Chuuya appreciates though.

At least, one thing remains the same.

Among the people that step inside the office is Nami, Oe Katsuo's sister. Her face brings a torrent of images to the surface – images of horse races, fireworks, of a man full of smiles – that Chuuya has to push down with force, digging his fingers into the meat of his thigh. Nami was added to the team because of her useful ability, *not* because of her leadership capabilities. That doesn't stop her from taking charge and giving Chuuya a highly colorful and creative report of what happened, including personal commentary though. Ten minutes

of talking only to conclude that they *failed*.

“You didn’t catch the damn ability user?”

“I told you, it wasn’t an ability user. That thing was not human!”

“I don’t care what it was. Why isn’t it dead? And why are you here wasting time instead of finding it?” When no one moves, Chuuya motions toward them and all five of them jerk up, bowing their heads before scampering away. All except one.

Chuuya wordlessly raises his eyebrows when Nami remains right where she is, a hand planted on her hip. “I want a new job,” she declares. “This whole fighting for my life and rolling around in the dirt business isn’t really my thing. I heard you need a new secretary.”

Gin came to the funeral, gave Chuuya their condolences and their resignation. He accepted it. He doesn’t blame them for what happened. He does blame their brother for breaking Dostoevsky out of his cell though. Whether it’s due to the conflict of interests or due to Gin’s loyalty to Dazai, not to Chuuya, their departure makes sense. It also sucks. Every person who has taken on the job since has begged Chuuya for mercy and another position after just a few days and he doesn’t have the heart to punish anyone for being honest.

“What makes you think you’re cut out for that?”

“It’s a desk job. How hard can it be?”

Chuuya can’t see Albatross or Shirase but he can sense their loud shock like a palpable thing in the silence of the office. It’s almost enough to make him crack a laugh but his mouth remains shut. “Okay.”

This time, he hears Albatross let out something akin to a startled squeak behind him. It makes Nami frown at him like he is the unreasonable one here. “Great. So let’s talk salary. I want –”

“Let’s see how you do first,” Chuuya cuts in and jerks his head to the side. “The secretary’s office is next door. Settle in. I’ll send someone to show you the ropes. Then we can discuss everything else.”

Nami looks at him for another moment before she shrugs and aims a jovial grin at him. “Cool. See ya later then!”

And just like that, she spins on her heels and waltzes away.

Albatross leans down to him as soon as she disappears behind the corner. “Are you sure about that choice? She’s kind of…”

“*Hot,”* Shirase exclaims, beating Chuuya to an answer. It makes both of them blink in surprise. “She’s got spunk! What was her name again?”

“Nami,” Chuuya says slowly.

“Nami,” Shirase repeats, clutching a hand to his chest. There are literal sparkles in his eyes. “I think I just fell in love… Do you guys know if she’s single?”

Albatross shrugs. “Dunno. But if you’re quick enough, you’ll catch her.”

Shirase takes that more seriously than he has taken anything else, sprinting after her like his life is on the line.

“I know that she’s not the most conventional choice,” Chuuya says, lifting his feet to the desk with a sigh. “But she has a strong ability and doesn’t give a shit about anything. May be useful to have up here.”

“Kouyou will get an aneurysm dealing with her.” Albatross snickers. “I can’t wait to see it.”

Chuuya coughs out something close to but not quite a laugh. That’s the third thing about his choice. Being the boss is so nauseatingly depressing and dull that he’s desperate enough to find entertainment wherever he can, even in Nami, though she will probably cause him a hundred headaches too.

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Lesson 3: Isolation is risky

The world is dangerous and enemies are everywhere. Everyone has to protect themselves. A fortress seems the safest. But isolation exposes you to more dangers than it protects you from. It cuts you off from valuable information, it makes you conspicuous and an easy target. Better to circulate among people, find allies, mingle. You are shielded from your enemies by the crowd.

As in: don’t be me!

I thought that keeping myself isolated would keep me safe, not only from physical danger but emotional ones. But it's virtually impossible to stop caring entirely and once it catches up to you, you will have cracks in your fortress. It's especially hard for people like you. You're someone who thinks with his heart first. You need others. Don't let the title change that. And don't let Kouyou tell you otherwise.

Edit: I'll make sure your heart stays in the right place… but just in case you're reading this while I'm off doing fake-dead things like being an undercover barista or taking a nap, don't be fooled into thinking that you're better off alone. You're not. I wasn't. It took me a long time to realize that. Almost too long. But better late than never, right? 😊

***

Chuuya hates a lot of things about being the boss, but most of all, he hates how much closer it brings him to understanding the person that Dazai was. It would be so much easier to resent him for leaving. Instead every day another piece clicks into place.

Being among people, something that used to be so simple has become grueling. His inner circle wouldn't let him isolate himself even if he tried to, but it feels different now.

There is this disconnection that distances him from everyone around him. Every word that he speaks, every gesture that he makes, every decision that he takes is seen through a different set of eyes now. When people look at him, they no longer see just another human being. They see the money that pays for their livelihood, the blood that they have to spill for him, and their lives that they have to give up for him if he asks them to.

Being the so-called King of the Sheep wasn't like that.

His ability, the power that it gave him, removed him from them as well but they were never his soldiers. Chuuya never had to bear the responsibility of sending them to their deaths one day. All he had to do was keep them safe, even if that meant sacrificing himself.

Dying for someone is so much easier than letting them die for you.

His circle of friends is the only remaining place where he feels remotely human – but even that feeling of normalcy continues to fade with each day. When Piano Man stops by the office to consult him, all Chuuya thinks about is what will happen when the Bishop's Staff

strikes again and the people, the friends he sends to the frontlines, die there. Shirase brags about robbing a jewelry store in his free time, to impress Nami with a 24-karat ring, and all Chuuya hears is what an easy target he makes to everyone who has a bone to pick with the Port Mafia, and, so, with Chuuya. He goes one floor below to sleep in his old bed with Yuan and Albatross next door because the chambers in the office suffocate him with the presence of a man who is no longer there only to see tombstones instead of their faces.

He never considered himself to be scared of many things, but bit by bit, fear becomes a parasite that he cannot shake no matter how hard he tries. It's all he feels. All he sees. All he hears no matter where he looks.

He is paralyzed by fear. All the time.

It makes him want to barricade himself in his office and never come out again. If he doesn't see their faces anymore, maybe their deaths won't hurt as much. If he just stops caring so damn hard, maybe it will be more bearable.

That's what Dazai did.

He isolated himself. Closed himself off from each and every one. Wrapped bandages around his flesh so no one could touch him and he *ruled*.

No wonder he was heartless enough to drag Chuuya into the mafia with the intention of killing himself and leaving the burden to him.

A part of Chuuya that hasn't seen the light of day for a long time now will always hate Dazai for it. Another part is tempted to do the same fucking thing.

But Chuuya can't just stop caring. If he does, he may as well let corruption loose and let it devour the entire planet. *That* is tempting too. More and more with each day.

The only thing sweeter than his own death is Dostoevsky's though.

So he swallows his fear and he tries to see his friends instead of their graves and he talks to them even if he has nothing to say anymore.

"How are things?" he asks absently, tossing a ball into the air. Kafka fetches it with her claws, wings flapping in wild excitement, then drops it back into his lap, demanding another round.

“What things?”

He turns his head to Yuan. She is leaning against the untouched bed with an expression that is half-uncertainty and half-concern. Chuuya hates that face. “I don’t know,” he admits and gives in to Kafka’s pleading stare, throwing the ball again; he mainly asks just to fill the silence, not because he has any specific questions. “Life. The job. Kouyou… Albatross.”

Kafka makes a sound between a growl and a squeak when the ball remains firmly in the air thanks to Chuuya’s ability. That will keep her busy for a while.

“I doubt you want to hear anything about Albatross considering we’re just friends with benefits,” Yuan says, wincing mildly.

Chuuya lets out a weak huff. “Still? I thought you guys were just saying that.”

He believed that he could do just casual with Dazai and then he got his heart put through a shredder.

“Some of us actually mean what we say.” As if realizing where that remark will lead Chuuya’s thoughts, Yuan quickly adds, “But I can tell you what is new. Shirase claims he is in love with someone he met *a week ago.* Can you believe that?”

“You mean Nami?”

“You know her?!” Yuan crosses her arms. “So does Albatross! How come everyone already got to meet her except me? I’ve been Shirase’s friend for most of his life and look at the thanks I get.”

Chuuya grunts in commiseration. “She’s my new secretary.”

Yuan clicks her tongue. “I still think Shirase should at least have the decency to introduce us. Do you know what he said when I confronted him about it?”

“What?”

“That I’m jealous! Because he has a girlfriend now!”

They spend the next hour discussing Shirase’s love life while entertaining the pets. It’s not Chuuya’s favorite topic in the world, nor a topic that interests him much, but it’s a welcome distraction from

the reports he has to listen to otherwise. He is glad that Yuan doesn't leave, even when their words run out and worn-out silence fills the room.

Too glad.

He shouldn't be.

"You, Shirase, and the others should go."

There's rustling behind him. "What?"

"Leave the Port Mafia," he says, staring at the darkness that surrounds him. "You guys never asked to be here and you don't want to be. You should leave while you still can."

"I can't just leave." He hears the frown in Yuan's voice. "What about you?"

"My fate is sealed. Yours isn't."

There is another reluctant pause before Yuan quietly says, "You could come with us."

"No," Chuuya murmurs. "Not anymore."

It's too late for him. He only has one purpose now and that is to finish what Dazai started but didn't get to finish. Kill Dostoevsky. That's it.

"I don't have anywhere else to go."

Chuuya exhales a noise of frustration. "Then start from scratch. I could get you a new identity. Papers. Money. Anything."

Being the boss is good for one thing at least. The sheep, or what's left of them, should fucking use it before Chuuya gets them killed once and for all.

"We're family, Chuuya." Yuan sounds just as exhausted as he feels. "I think we've already lost enough."

He doesn't give her an answer. Doing that would mean agreeing with her and he doesn't agree. They *have* lost enough. That is exactly why she should pack her bags, run and never look back.

"Besides, Shirase wouldn't just leave either now that he has a girlfriend," she adds with a dry snort.

Chuuya's cough of laughter tastes like bitter medicine. It fades faster though. "He can ask Nami to come along, for all I care. She'd say yes too."

"*We* wouldn't say yes."

"You should."

Yuan responds with a disapproving silence.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Chuuya digs his fingers into the pillow underneath his head. He can barely breathe around the weight in his chest.

God, he misses Dazai.

***

Lesson 19: Create compelling spectacles

Striking imagery and grand symbolic gestures create the aura of power. Everyone responds to them. So stage spectacles for those around you, full of arresting visuals and radiant symbols that heighten your presence. Dazzled by appearances, no one will notice what you are really doing. They will be too busy worshipping you.

Example 1: Dostoevsky and his (ridiculous) blood angels. They were pretty pretentious but also kind of cool if you really think about it.

Example 2: I became the boss after a conflict with a certain guerilla organization called Mimic. They were originally from Europe who escaped to Japan as they committed war-crimes during the great war. You can picture them as a bunch of wandering soldiers who just wanted to find someone worthy enough to kill them as one last bit of solace after facing disgrace and shame. Their leader had the ability to see seven seconds into the future, so it was quite difficult to defeat them, but once I did, the first thing that I did as a boss was gather the last remaining members and throw them into a fighting pit.

I don't know if I have or will ever tell you this but that was how my father chose his heir. He tossed his children into a pit and let them fight it out until only one survivor remained standing.

Not everyone in the mafia remembered this since not everyone was here during my father's reign, but enough people did to be aware of the significance of the spectacle that I gave them. In a way, I was punishing the

Mimic soldiers, but I was also granting them one last mercy: to go out fighting, just like they had wanted, except that they had to kill each other this time. Beyond that though, I was reminding everyone that I was the legitimate boss of the Port Mafia. That I, too, had fought in that pit. That I had survived.

It may sound old-fashioned and overly dramatic. It was. But it was also efficient.

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In the end, the thing that pushes Chuuya is a minor skirmish between a few Bishop's Staff members and the Port Mafia. No one dies, but Albatross, who is part of it, gets hurt. Not badly. Just a flesh wound from a stray bullet and a concussion. But sometimes a flesh wound is all it takes.

Chuuya summons the tech team that investigated the Bishop's Staff eye prosthetics several months ago and makes them explain, step by step, how to trigger the kill switch that will take out hundreds of people with the mere push of a button. Then he gathers his executives and the upper crust of the Port Mafia and he holds a speech. He is barely conscious of the words he utters, big words, dramatic ones, declarations about taking back power, ending a conflict that has gone on for too long, and doing what the previous boss wasn't able to do; he just knows that it's convincing enough to not only get unanimous support from everyone present but loud, passionate encouragement.

His people want blood.

So he is going to give it to them.

And once that's done, once they are truly and fully his, they will help him find and kill Dostoevsky once and for all.

"Are you sure about this?" Piano Man asks once everything is set up, keeping his voice only loud enough for them to hear.

Chuuya glances around the room. Yuan looks less conflicted than he thought she would. Because she remembers what the Bishop's Staff did to the sheep. Because Albatross' arm is still bandaged from the bullet he caught. Kouyou radiates wordless approval. So does the Colonel and every other high-ranking member of the mafia. This is what they do, after all. They eliminate threats to the city and to them.

And as the boss, it is his job to give these orders. To make sure that

his people don't get hurt. To bear the burden of what it takes to ensure their well-being.

His gaze slides down to the kill switch on the screen. "I am."

Piano Man nods. Then steps aside, leaving the stage to him.

Pressing one button to take hundreds of lives. Easy enough.

A tiny part of him rebels inside of him when he lifts his hand, reminding him of the utter perversity of such a heinous act. It's no better than playing god. But that's just it. One man started this when he decided to play god. It's time to end his game.

Yes, another part of him screams, the loudest one of all, corruption, frothing at the prospect of slaughter. *Do it. Do it. Do. It. Do –*

Chuuya lowers his finger and pushes the button.

Done.

Then he tilts his head to the side and waits.

He is not sure what for. It's unlikely that the entirety of the Bishop's Staff army was gathered in one place, so the full scale of this decision will not be instantly recognizable. Only later, an hour or two, once people connect the dots.

Still, he waits. As does everyone else. It's so quiet in the office that you could hear a pin drop. So quiet that they are able to hear the muffled siren that begins to wail somewhere in the distance. One, at first. Then, a second one joins in. And eventually a third. A fourth.

Chuuya rises to his feet and marches over to the window. To see the damage that he has caused. At first glance, Yokohama looks the same as it always does at night. Tall and bright and expensive. But the longer he stares, the more flaws he starts to notice. The smoke. The helicopters that have taken to the sky, digging for a story to report, for the culprit of this atrocity. The near-muffled sound of screaming.

This was, of course, inevitable.

Pulling the trigger of every explosive device set in place always meant risking the death of people nearby, risking car accidents, work accidents, and mass panic. It's what Dostoevsky has wanted all along. To cause mass panic.

Now he has it.

The relief never comes though. The Bishop's Staff has been exterminated. The enemy soldiers that have killed the sheep, countless other ability users, and just as many Port Mafia members are gone. There should be relief. A burst of color amidst the lifeless fog. There isn't.

"Send out rescue units," he orders. "Help the civilians that were collateral damage."

He receives a chorus of "yes, boss"es.

"And keep an eye out on the news. They will have a lot to say."

When the room has emptied, save for one person, Chuuya tears his eyes away and heads toward the door. "Don't bother me for the next few hours."

"You shouldn't go," Piano Man says.

Chuuya pauses to look at him. It's not the danger that Piano Man is warning him about. Chuuya is bulletproof. Arguably the strongest ability user in the city when it comes to brute strength. He can walk the streets without a barricade of bodyguards trailing him every time. He can fight. He can help. That's not what Piano Man is worried about.

"I gave the order. The least I can do is clean up the mess."

"You did it to bring down an enemy that has caused too much destruction," Piano Man retorts with a fierce nod. "Now let us take care of the rest. You don't have to see it."

"I do," Chuuya says. He has to see the bodies, both guilty and innocent. The damage. The aftermath of this one decision. If he doesn't, is any of it even real? If he stays here in the safety of his four walls, removed from the brutal truth of the outer – the *real* world, making choices like these will be too easy. He could kill over and over and not witness even a sliver of suffering.

He doesn't want to be like Dostoevsky, walking through life untouched. Unaffected. Not feeling pain but not feeling anything else either.

That's not life. That's a puppet show. A game. A simulation.

But not life.

“I have to see it.”

Piano Man lets out a sigh of defeat and rubs the crease between his brows. “Be careful. I will keep order here in the meantime.”

“Thank you.” Chuuya meets his eyes but can’t bear to see the affection reflected in them for longer than a heartbeat. After a final nod, he steers out of the office and to the rooftop.

Five minutes later, he lands on asphalt and jogs to the first site of destruction he sees. A pile-up. Two cars lie on the side of the road, overturned. The smell of charred rubber, fuel, and smoke encases the air. Debris is scattered across the ground. Shattered glass and twisted metal crunch under his feet with every staggered step that he takes.

Chuuya doesn’t know where to look or whom to help. Too many people with torn clothes and bruised flesh limping away from the wreckage. Too many sirens blaring here and in the distance and above – everywhere. Too much shouting and distressed screaming. It all blends into one deafening ringing inside his head.

He stares and he stares and he stares.

Piano Man was right.

It was stupid to come here. To think that he was strong enough to face the reality of what he has done.

This is just one accident out of hundreds. Just one. And Chuuya –

A child-like wail cuts through his phonograph of pity and drags him back into the present. His head whips around, searching for the source. There. On the other side of the road, in front of an overturned vehicle hunkers a small girl with two ink-black pigtails and a yellow dress. Her whole body shakes from crying yet nobody hears her.

“Hey there,” Chuuya breathes and squats down to her eye level, checking her for any visible injuries. “What’s your name?”

“My mommy,” she hiccups, shaking her head from side to side. “I want my mommy.”

“I can look for your mommy. Can you tell me which car she was in?” He gives her tiny shoulder a gentle squeeze in the hope to calm her

down, just enough to get an answer. “Do you remember the color of your mommy’s car?”

“R-red. My mommy’s car was red.”

Chuuya’s eyes slide to the wreckage. His chest contracts. Red. He schools his features and looks back at the child. “Can you tell me your name?”

She gulps down several watery breaths of air before mumbling, “Tsuneko.”

“Tsuneko-chan, I’ll look for your mommy, okay?” He grabs her hand and leads her away to the other side of the road, away from the wreck and the fuel and the sight of something she might never forget. “Just stay right here. Don’t move, you hear me?”

She gives him a trembling nod. Sniffs loudly. “I miss my mommy.”

“I know, sweetheart,” Chuuya murmurs. “I know.”

Then he lets go of her and jogs toward the car – or what is left of it. He flattens himself to the ground to look for survivors. All he finds is the lifeless, bloodied body of a woman, hanging upside-down, neck twisted at a disturbing angle. Tsuneko’s mommy. He reaches out to feel her pulse. Just in case. Nothing. His eyes fixate on something else as he does. A bright purple baby seat. His stomach bottoms out.

Tsuneko is too big for a baby seat.

He lifts the car, hoping he will stir someone living inside of it, hear a toddler’s scream or even the hint of movement but nothing except silence stares back at him. He doesn’t even find the corpse.

Walking back, he feels disconnected from his own body, his mind suspended somewhere above him. He watches himself crouch down in front of Tsuneko, take her tiny fingers into his and ask her if she had a sibling. He watches himself nod as Tsuneko tells him about her baby brother. Tobio. One year old. He watches the guilt-ridden face of someone who just killed a child’s mother and brother.

“Where does your father work, Tsuneko-chan?”

Sniffling, she looks up at him. “It’s just mommy, Tobio, and me.” Her big, round eyes blink up at him. “Is my mommy going to come back soon?”

He could lie. Let the authorities take care of informing her that she is now an orphan. He wants to. He wants to really bad.

But he can't.

"No, sweetheart. I'm afraid not."

Her eyes fill with tears. Her mouth quivers. "Why not? Where did she go?"

"I don't know." He has no idea where people go after they die. Heaven. Hell. Purgatory. Nothing? Where did Dazai go when his body hit the asphalt? Where is he now? He doesn't fucking know. "But she loved you, Tsuneko-chan. Your mommy and your brother loved you very much. They told me that before they went. I want you to remember that, okay? Every time you think of them, remember how much they loved you – how much they'll always love you no matter where they are."

She nods as fat droplets run down her cheeks.

"Just remember that," Chuuya murmurs over and over. It's the only mercy that he can give her. The only kindness after everything that he has taken from her.

And still, Tsuneko is only one of hundreds of others who is affected by the choice he has made.

What does that make him, a man who will stop at nothing to protect those he cares about?

Desperate, or just as bad as Dostoevsky?

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SOMEWHERE IN ANOTHER UNIVERSE

Dazai slides into the seat across from the man with the casualty of a life-long friend, an engineered smile plastered to his face, wide and horrendous.

Yet before he breaks it, Natsume lifts his eyes from his book and smiles. "Hello, Dazai. I've been waiting for you."

The possibility that they didn't find Natsume but that he let them find him was, of course, there. Someone with his power could slip through the cracks for the rest of his life – for the rest of all life, probably. It

still takes Dazai a considerable amount of self-restraint not to twitch. To remain focused on the task.

If anything, this is a good sign. Natsume is aware of Dazai's existence. That raises the likelihood of getting him to help them.

"Sensei," Dazai says, raising his head ever so slightly. "You certainly didn't make it easy."

Natsume's smile doesn't falter as he shrugs lightly. "Yet here you are."

"Yet here I am. I assume that means you know why I sought you out?"

"I imagine it has something to do with the fact that you're not from here."

Straight to the point then. Even better.

"Great," Dazai quips and eagerly braces his forearms on the table. "So you will help me get back to my original universe?"

Natsume takes a leisure sip of his coffee before he places his cup back down, meets his gaze and says, "No."

Dazai's eyelids slide closed and open again. He stares at the man. "Why not?" he finally snaps.

"Because you killed yourself, Dazai," Natsume says, like it's the most obvious thing in the world. "You died."

Dazai supposes it does make sense except for the tiny fact that nothing in this complex web of worlds and universes follows the rules of logic.

"How come I am sitting right here then, hm? I don't feel very *dead* right now, sensei."

"I admit I am not sure how that is possible either." Natsume strokes his mustache, though he sounds less upset than curious. "I suspect it's the result of two things: your consciousness clinging to your old life and your awareness of the Book." Then he waves his hand. "But don't worry, son. You will find rest once you accept it. Eventually."

His words split Dazai's future abruptly into two. One road that spans ahead of him like an endless highway is telling Natsume to go fuck himself because he did not go through the effort of spending weeks stuck in another world, lonely and miserable, only to die in the end anyway. Or worse, repeat this process over and over until he

eventually tires of trying and gives up.

The other side is not a road but a sensation. The precious few milliseconds after waking, suffusing every atom of his body with snug warmth and sweet bliss, similar to the sensation of floating in the water. Dazai stopped experiencing that type of sleep for so long. Until Chuuya joined his bed. Such moments were still rare, even with him, but they existed.

Dazai imagines death to be like that. An idyllic nothing.

And so, so tempting.

He has to clench his hands to keep his head clear from the sudden and violent urge to pick the latter option. It is, after all, what he has been dreaming of his entire life.

And isn't it also the reason he took the leap on that rooftop?

Sure, Dostoevsky forced his hand. He can tell himself that to sleep better at night in this stolen body. But when has life *not* forced his hand? Did his father, did Mori, did Dazai himself not teach him the many ways of counteracting impossible choices?

There is always something that can be done, no matter how tiny the chances of success and how enormous the risk of failure are. Dazai could have done something. Anything. He could have.

But he didn't.

The truth is that a part of him longed to fall into his death. He has always longed for that and he will always continue to long for it for as long as he is alive and breathing, no matter how many promises he makes.

Chuuya was –

Chuuya is good, so full of life that he would infect even someone like Dazai with his stubborn wish to survive at all costs. But he is human. He would never be enough to scrub the exhaustion from Dazai's veins – and he shouldn't have to. It's not his job, nor his responsibility. The only thing that attempt leads to is mutual self-destruction.

Just look at what Dazai has already done to him.

"And you just don't want to see the truth. I wanted an out. I chose you to

be my replacement. Why I chose you doesn't matter. You're focusing on the wrong details."

"And the right details are what? That you manipulated me into staying? That all of this — you and me — has been part of a giant scheme to make me care this entire time?"

"Your suspicions have been right all along. And you care. *You do."*

"If I suspected all along, what is there to care about? So you used me. So what, Dazai?"

Maybe choosing death is not only selfish but also the right thing to do. Maybe it's both.

He made a promise. He broke it. Now somewhere, in another universe millions of light years away, Chuuya is burying Dazai's body and their vow and the life that they were supposed to have together. With cows and stray animals and way too much light for people like them. And Dazai's guilt tastes like bile in his throat.

But that will be gone too.

He is still subject to these wretched feelings of humanity because he is still alive. Once he is truly and fully dead, he will feel nothing anymore. None of it will matter. Because he will not remember any of it. He will not even be able to think.

He will simply cease to exist – just as he has always wanted to.

Dazai forces his eyes to return Natsume's casually curious gaze. To look at the being that is sitting across from him. His mouth opens, ready to utter his answer. He is ready. He has *been* ready his entire life already, damn it, and yet the words resist him. They refuse to leave.

He can't say it.

People live to save themselves. You will understand that at the moment of your own death.

Dazai stood on top of a rooftop and he let himself fall, yet he can't even utter a single sentence that would finally give him everything he has ever wanted – the only thing that he has ever wanted.

But was it really? a treacherous little voice whispers. Was it the only thing he has ever wanted, was there truly nothing else, or was it

simply the loudest? The desire that has endured the longest? A wish so familiar that it had become a friend, a habit, an emotional refuge, because, at the end of the day, no matter what shade of horror Dazai was living through, he was always able to vanish inside his head and fantasize about death. About leaving behind his sordid world of desperation. Knowing that he could kill himself had been his first ever item of comfort, and he carried it inside of his pocket throughout life, reaching for it every time the world hurt too much.

But it was not the only one.

There *were* other things Dazai wanted. Not many and not as powerful, but they existed, the little hopes and aspirations.

Chuuya's genuine laughter. The smell of freshly brewed coffee. Feeling sore after having good sex. Getting high. The smell of blood. Chuuya, Chuuya, Chuuya –

"It's not always easy but it's a good life. A life like any."

The thing is, Dazai's hand slides into his pocket, that the comfort of the slow, inexorable death that begins at birth will always follow him; and it is as suffocating as it is soothing. He will die one day. That is the one irrefutable certainty about this horrible and wonderful life – it only has one ending and everyone reaches it eventually, some sooner than later.

He only has one shot at keeping his promise though. Or at least trying to glue the pieces back together. Just this one chance. He doesn't have to be a mathematical genius to see what the better choice is.

"I don't want peace. I want to go back."

Natsume's smile fades a little. "I find your determination fascinating, Dazai. I do. And I sympathize with you and the world that you have left behind. But my answer is not going to change. You have already made your choice. Now only acceptance remains. That's the sole thing that will save you from wandering for eternity."

"Why let me find you then?" Dazai shakes his head, refusing to accept anything after coming to such a painful and excruciating conclusion. "It was the *wrong* choice. Give me a chance to fix it."

"I'm here because your existence –" he gestures at him, probably referring to Dazai being in the wrong universe "— is disrupting the order of things. You are an anomaly. An interesting one, I admit, but

an anomaly nonetheless."

"Great, so send me back!"

"You died."

"So what? Creating an infinite number of universes just to watch the people in it suffer horrible fates like some kind of sick, twisted pervert who is obsessed with voyeurism is fine but bringing someone back from the dead is too much for you?"

"Yes," Natsume says, earnestly, as though Dazai's question wasn't rhetorical in nature. "I observe. I don't interfere. That's not my job."

"Really, because for some reason you interfered with Odasaku's life when you left him the Book. You didn't just observe."

Natsume's mouth flattens as he leans back in his seat. He looks only a little displeased by the reminder, mostly he just looks like an old man with a superiority complex. "Oda was already well on his way to his chosen path. All I did was give him a push. What he did with it was entirely up to him. I did not alter anything."

"That's bullshit, sensei. Don't tell me that in all of the millions of universes, you have never interfered."

"That, Dazai," Natsume holds his eyes, "is the reason why I will never do it again."

Dazai sucks in a gust of breath before directing the entire force of his most diabolical smile onto the man. "Fine, you don't want to play? Let's try it my way then. Send me back or I will hunt you to the ends of every universe. I will find you, every single time, and I will make you pay."

"Do you believe you're the first one to ever find and threaten me?"

Dazai forces his rationality to stay still as he stares at the man. Of course he isn't the first one. Perhaps it's not even possible to kill a creature like him. But sometimes it's necessary to be blindly, naively delusional.

Natsume sighs. "I have been through this scenario, Dazai. Hundreds of times. In the end, you are only human though."

The last part is a warning.

Yet despite how trivial Natsume makes the word, human, sound, it doesn't diminish one crucial fact.

What did he call Dazai?

An anomaly.

Dazai shouldn't be here. He guesses that it is not only a moral but a technical issue. His existence disrupts the world. Just like something else does.

"I will not only disrupt the so-called order of things but I will annihilate them." Leaning forward, he hears his heart pulse inside of his chest. "Do you know what it was that Dostoevsky used against me, sensei? The threat that brought me here?"

Natsume continues to gaze calmly at him.

So Dazai goes ahead. "There is this phenomenon that happens when too many people find out the truth about the Book. It destabilizes their entire world. I mean, even *you* warned me about it a long time ago. I imagine that would be quite bothersome. Sure, you can always fall back on another world, but sensei…" He pauses. "Make no mistake, I will not find rest, and I will not stop until you let me go back. I will destroy every single universe inside that fucking Book of yours if I have to. It may take me a hundred universes. Or a thousand. But that's the thing, I'm a dead man. I have nothing but time."

With a sigh, Dazai leans back and folds his arms over his chest. He has made his move. Now it's Natsume's turn.

"I'll see you soon then," Natsume replies after a moment of silence, and Dazai only has the time to blink once before the man snaps his fingers and –

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The man wakes not with a gasp but slowly, hazily, like wading through thick water. Gravity weighs him down impossibly deep. No, not gravity. Something else. Something that is both firm and supple at the same time. Hot too. So hot.

"Morning, sunshine."

The voice coaxes him out of the darkness and into the light. Dazai blinks one, two, three times before the picture above him starts to

make sense.

Chuuya, seated on top of him, cocks his head to the side. “Sleep well?”

“Mmm,” Dazai hums and stretches with a yawn, trying to identify the thing that doesn’t feel quite so right but taking his time with it. There is no need to ruin this glorious morning so soon. And, his eyes sweep over the gorgeous thing straddling him in nothing but an oversized and wrinkled shirt, what a glorious morning it is indeed. Only Chuuya can look this handsome when his hair resembles a bird's nest. Dazai’s hands automatically lift to his hips, tracing the swell of his flesh with appreciative fingertips. “Hello.”

The scrape of his voice, how odd it feels to produce proper words, is the first thing that sets off his alarm bells. The second one is the room he is in when his gaze flickers to the side, then the other, registering a hundred tiny details that are alien to him. And finally –

Chuuya surges forward and presses his mouth to his.

Dazai’s eyes fly open.

Finally, the memories begin to flood in. A café. Natsume. His undeterred *no.* Chuuya. Another Chuuya. Another world. Dostoevsky. Stepping off the ledge –

He makes a panicked noise in the back of his throat before pushing away the man that’s kissing him.

Chuuya tilts his head like a confused bird. “What?” Then he makes a face, touching his lips with his fingertips. “Do I have bad breath?”

“No,” Dazai hurries to say, then adds a nervous laugh. “No. I just – I need…”

He jerks his head to the side to express his wish to slide out of bed. Chuuya seems to understand just fine except when he climbs off Dazai, he instantly takes his place on the mattress, sliding his arms behind the back of his neck with a smirk and a shrug.

“Alright. If you want to do all the work, go ahead.”

Oh.

Oh.

Shaking his head, Dazai scrambles off the bed. “I don’t – I’m not

feeling too well. I think I need to –" He gestures to the door and hopes Chuuya can fill in the blanks himself because Dazai doesn't know where that door leads to, where he is in general, or *anything*, really.

It shouldn't be such a daunting experience the second time around but, at least, he had time to acclimate to his surroundings the last time instead of waking up with a half-naked man on top of him who is both a stranger and the most familiar person in the world.

"Want me to get you some medicine?"

Dazai trips over something hard and painful on the floor in his hurry to get away and runs head-first into the wall.

"Shit, are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Dazai says, rubbing his face and trying to blink away the white spots in his vision before grabbing the doorknob. "Don't worry about me! Just… Um, just go back to bed!"

"But what about –"

The rest of his speech gets drowned out by a shock wave when Dazai cuts to a halt in front of the windows in the living room.

Outside, in the distance, he can see *the Eiffel Tower*.

He is not in Japan.

How is he supposed to find Natsume when he's not even in Japan?

As his mind races for solutions, someone clears their throat behind him. Dazai turns to see Chuuya hovering in the doorway, wearing an expression that is as puzzled as it is concerned. "I know you said you're not feeling too well but are you okay?"

The only thing that comes out of Dazai's mouth is a vague noise. No, he is not okay. Not at all. This is not his Chuuya. But that doesn't make him any less real or any less deserving of life. Can he really destroy his whole just to get back to his?

"Want a hug?" Chuuya asks then with a crooked half-smile that makes Dazai nauseous from guilt.

It's a stupid thing to do but he nods anyway.

He still doesn't know what to say when Chuuya slides his arms around

his neck. What to do. Threatening to annihilate each world that isn't his is so much easier in theory than in practice. But he has to go back. He can't stay here. So, swallowing his nerves, he pulls this Chuuya tighter against him. As tight as he can. It's the least Dazai can give him before robbing him of everything.

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It turns out that this world comes with certain benefits. Apparently, he is semi-famous thanks to some kind of scandal involving his father. That means that one call is all it takes to arrange an interview on national television. Of course, he doesn't plan to talk about his business or the engagement rumors that have been floating around. No, he plans to tell quite a different story.

While this world's Chuuya notices Dazai's strange behavior, he must also be used to mood swings since he gives him enough space to set up the whole thing. He offers to accompany Dazai to the studio but Dazai declines. Seeing Chuuya, even if it's not his Chuuya, will only make him hesitate. He can't hesitate.

He just has to push through the guilt and make the author of this twisted story listen to him.

Dazai just doesn't expect it to happen so soon.

The man who welcomes him when he arrives at the studio is Natsume.

"Sensei," Dazai says, not sure if it's supposed to be a greeting or a question.

Natsume's mouth twists into a smile. An ancient, weary thing. "You're willing to bring down this entire world just to spite me?"

"I don't care about you nearly as much as you think I do. I just want to go back. That's all I ask for."

"And I told you that I cannot do that. Actions have consequences."

"You're the fucking *writer*," Dazai snaps. "You can. You just don't want to."

The horrible thing is that he sees compassion in Natsume's eyes. What if he is right? What if even he can't bring something dead back to life? What if Dazai's only two choices are to let go or to spend the rest of the eternity wandering different universes, all of which he doesn't

belong to?

“Everything comes to an end eventually, Dazai.”

Dazai shakes his head. “It wasn’t supposed to end so soon. I made a promise.”

“And you broke it. It’s not pretty but that’s life.” Natsume looks at him questioningly. “That’s what you told Dostoevsky. Life loses all meaning without pain and death. You of all people know that. How many times have you watched Chuuya die?”

“This is different,” he bites out. Not only that but it achieves the opposite. After every fucking tragedy that Dazai has had to live through, doesn’t he deserve to make it right at least once? Hasn’t he earned that?

“Maybe you’ve forgotten.”

He narrows his eyes. “Forgotten what?”

And the world goes black.

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The man wakes up with a gasp – and immediately jerks up as something wet attacks his face.

A dog.

Grimacing, Dazai tries to gently shove the creature away. The collar says *Baki.* Baki looks vaguely familiar but he can’t place the dog to a specific universe right away. There are too many of them with similar names and similar dogs. It’s exhausting to keep track of them all.

The room is obnoxiously bright, golden sunlight flooding inside and highlighting how cluttered the floor is, covered in all sorts of objects that Dazai steps on his way to the door. That speaks of Chuuya. So does the quaint house that this other Dazai must live in. There are questionable paintings on the walls, and dying plants in the corner of the hallway that leads downstairs where Dazai sees a terrible-looking hat waiting for its owner on a chair. The owner doesn’t seem to be anywhere though.

“Where is the man, Baki?” Dazai mutters to the stupidly loyal dog that trails after him, probably hoping for treats. That’s Chuuya’s specialty

though. Dazai doesn't remember this universe, not yet, but he knows without a doubt that it had to be Chuuya who brought home this slobbering creature. He shoots Baki an expectant look. "Where is Chuuya, huh?"

Wagging her tail, Baki barks.

"Is he at work?"

Another bark.

"Outside?"

Bark, bark, bark. She is of no help to Dazai. Typical dog.

Dazai pauses when he spots the calendar. *2002*. A universe that's set in a much earlier timeline this time, huh? Dazai, when he finally bothers to look into the mirror, is old too. Older. Older than forty, for sure. Still pretty handsome though.

Something about the sticky notes on the fridge with Chuuya's handwriting on them and the framed pictures he finds of Chuuya and him on some kind of vacation pull at the back of his mind, but it's not until he steps into the backyard, overgrown and borderline neglected, and sees the fountain that he finally remembers.

Chuuya isn't anywhere in the house because Chuuya is dead.

In this universe, he died years ago.

Dazai lifts his head to glare at the sky. "You," he says through clenched teeth, "have a sick sense of humor, sensei."

***

Similarly to the universe before this one, Dazai happens to have connections to the media. Contrary to the other universe, everything moves much slower and it takes him four entire days to arrange an interview with a somewhat established press magazine. Natsume isn't here to welcome him this time.

Good.

This time, Dazai has no problem burning this world down either. Chuuya is *gone* and the Dazai he left behind is a pathetic artist counting the days to come home to his dead husband. Dazai will be doing him a favor. However, when he starts to tell the journalist the

story of The Book and all the worlds it contains, he practically sees the paper-dry skepticism eclipse her initial interest in him.

“Mr. Dazai,” she asks before he can even finish his tale, “are you… drunk?”

Exposing The Book, as it turns out, is much, much harder in a world where abilities are unheard of.

Dazai tries telling a few civilians on his way home. He doesn’t need the entire world to know, right? Just a few people are enough to crumble the fabric of this universe. But no matter how many times he insists that he isn’t drunk or on drugs, no one believes him. No one even listens to him. The planet continues to spin. Natsume doesn’t show up. And Dazai is trapped.

Trapped in a place where Chuuya isn’t even alive anymore.

***

It takes two miserable weeks of spending his time all alone with no one but the dog for Dazai to crack and mix himself a combination of pills and liquor that is sure to stop his heart eventually. Dying will just send him to another universe again. Either that or –

A knock on the door.

Dazai considers swallowing his death cocktail first. Then he sets down the glass with a sigh and stands up.

As expected, Natsume stands on his porch. He invites himself inside without a word.

“You’re not funny,” is the first thing that Dazai tells him.

“I am not trying to be.”

“Really? Sending me to a universe where Chuuya is dead after I said that it’s different isn’t a joke to you?”

“No.” Taking a self-assured seat in the dining room, Natsume nods toward the glass and the pills. “But clearly I was right.”

“No,” Dazai says with an aggravated huff and grabs the glass to throw it against the wall. It shatters. Spills dark liquid all over the carpet. “No, you’re not. I wasn’t about to kill myself because I can’t handle a little pain. I did that because I knew you would show up. And you did.

So I was right." Dazai points at himself. "That was me. Not you."

Natsume's expression doesn't even twitch. "And why did you want me to come? I told you I couldn't send you back."

Dazai presses his mouth shut.

"You want to send me to a different universe," Natsume says for him when he doesn't speak. "You can't tolerate being alone, Dazai. I don't blame you. You've suffered enough. So why are you hell-bent on prolonging it when you could finally get the rest that you want? That you have *earned*?"

It can't be just the guilt. The moment Dazai lets go, death will take that too. It will take everything. His longing. His love. His broken promise. All he has to do is say yes and walk away.

"I don't know," he whispers. "I just know that I don't want it. Not yet."

Natsume's mouth twists into a sad, sympathetic smile. Then the world turns black.

***

The man wakes up with a gasp.

Alone.

Again.

***

The man wakes up without making a single sound – and immediately wrinkles his nose.

"Hey," someone – no, Chuuya says, flopping down next to him with a tired sigh. It's not his universe. Not his Chuuya. Dazai can tell immediately. But the euphoria of just seeing any Chuuya no matter which world he belongs to, is almost dizzying enough to make Dazai grab his face and kiss him until his taste is imprinted on his tongue. Almost.

His nostrils flare as he tries to pinpoint the oddity of this universe. Something is extremely different.

When he turns to the side, Chuuya is watching him with an amused

frown. “You good?”

“Chuuya. Why does everything smell so intensely?”

***

The man wakes up with a scream. Maybe he wakes up from screaming. The point is that he is screaming because a knife is stabbing through his hand, twisting cruelly and magnifying the pain that explodes behind his eyeballs by a hundredfold, and something is howling above him, the wind, the sky itself maybe.

Straddling his waist with an aggressive glare is Chuuya, barely visible in the murky darkness of their surroundings.

“Chuuya,” Dazai rasps, shaking his throbbing head side to side, “it’s me! Stop it –”

“I know it’s you, ya pretentious motherfucker,” Chuuya hisses back, withdrawing his blade only to aim it at his eye this time. “But once I’m done with ya, you’ll be the one havin’ trouble recognizin’ anyone.”

The world around them sways differently. Either Dazai’s light-headed from physical agony or the ground underneath isn’t stable. Or –

Waves. Water washes over the ground, the deck, soaking his clothes. He tastes salt on his lips.

Oh, christ.

Dazai glances down at himself, then at Chuuya, an atrocious pirate hat on top of his head.

Are they—?

Thunder reverberates through the air.

“Wait,” Dazai yelps before Chuuya actually carves out his eyes, “it’s not me! I’m not the Dazai that you know! I’m from another world, I just –”

Chuuya spits in his face and rotates the knife between his fingers. Then he aims.

***

The man wakes up with a low groan.

The room spins in disorientating circles. It takes him four attempts to fully blink open his eyes and take stock of his surroundings. It's too dark to properly make out anything but he is in a bed, as per usual. The sheets soft against his skin.

"Where now, sensei," he mutters to himself and furrows his brows upon hearing his voice. He sounds strange. Different somehow. Not just because he is occupying another Dazai's body. Something else is off.

Dazai sits up. Glances around. Glances down at himself. Then he touches his chest.

He has breasts. They're pretty small, barely a handful but the difference is still palpable.

Oh.

***

"Are you not tired of this game?" Natsume asks him one day, a dozen, maybe a hundred universes later.

They are, once again, at a café. Natsume is fond of those. So stereotypical.

The truth is that he is. But worse than exhaustion, a familiar enemy, is uncertainty. Dazai's memories of his universe, the one has come from and the one he will return to one day, are growing weaker and weaker each time he wakes up in another one. Sometimes he rocks to a sudden halt because he cannot remember what year it was when he died. What year it was that he met his Chuuya.

Sometimes he fears he will forget where it is that he is going before he ever reaches it.

In this world, Dazai is just a civilian. A university student, majoring in Comparative Literature. His life is far from perfect. His dorm room is littered with empty bottles of sake. His fridge only contains canned crab and ice cream. He doesn't seem to have any proper friends except Dostoevsky – oh, the irony. And from what he has gathered, Chuuya is an engineering major. They haven't met yet. They passed each other in the library once and Chuuya's eyes briefly slid over Dazai before they looked away.

It would be easy, so laughably easy to just stay here. Chuuya doesn't

know him yet, so he would never be able to tell the difference. Dazai could build a life here. He wouldn't have to keep an entire organization running. Wouldn't have to own up to all his sins. Wouldn't have to worry about keeping anyone alive except for, maybe, the poor plant on his desk. Sooner or later, he would forget the rest of the details of his original universe too. Then, even the guilt would fade.

He would get away scot-free. All he would have to do is say yes and accept the blank page that Natsume oh so generously has offered him.

But it's too easy. For as much as he has longed his entire life to find some kind of peace, everything inside of him strains against the idea of riding off into this false sunset. No one would enjoy a novel with an ending this unsatisfyingly simple. He doubts he would enjoy such a life either.

Dazai tilts his head to Natsume. "Aren't you?"

Natsume takes a sip of his coffee. He always does, no matter where or when they are. "To be frank, it's the most fun I've had in a while."

"So you're torturing me because you're bored?" Dazai smiles widely. "How wonderful."

"We can end this any time."

"Yes, all you have to do is just send me back. So do it," Dazai shoots back and claps his hands. As always. "Chop, chop."

"I can't," Natsume answers. As always.

"What can you do then?"

Maybe he has been asking the wrong question all this time.

"You can send me to different universes. I get that much," Dazai thinks out loud, gazing at the sky before directing his frown at Natsume. "How many are there?"

"Many."

"Give me a rough estimate."

"I can't do that either."

"You know, as someone who has been a writer in a lot of words, you

really should have found a better hobby than writing. You *suck* at it."

Natsume takes another gulp of his god-forsaken coffee before setting it down and giving Dazai that sad smile again. But Natsume's sympathy is a farce. The least he could do, if he insists on punishing Dazai, is own up to his sadism. "Have you ever considered that I'm doing you a favor?"

"I thought you weren't in the business of doing favors," Dazai mutters and arches one brow. This whole spiel is about maintaining natural order, according to Natsume. His logic is severely flawed.

"Not if the favor interferes with natural law, no. Not sending you back *is* keeping everything in order."

"Oh, and zapping me from universe to universe doesn't mess with it?"

"That's why I would like you to stop," Natsume deadpans.

Dazai inhales a sharp breath before leaning forward and fixing the man with a spiteful grin. "Doing me a favor would be letting me decide for myself."

"Even if it would go against everything that you stand for?"

Dazai pauses. Narrows his eyes. "So there is a way."

The staggering sway of his stomach doesn't come from blind surprise. If he didn't think there was a way to get back, Dazai wouldn't be wasting his energy jumping from one world that he doesn't belong in to another. He knows the line between self-harm and sacrifice. But Natsume has been a coward and a liar, denying the possibility. Until now.

This tastes like hope.

"Not one that is feasible for someone like you," Natsume says, basically saying nothing at all.

"What does that mean?"

"It means," Natsume sighs deeply in an unusual display of irritation, "that you've struggled with your humanity for too long for me to take that away from you."

"I really don't think that you have a right to speak about humanity," Dazai spits back, his nostrils flaring. Natsume is the last person on

earth to have a say about that considering he spends his time building dreadful universes and observing the people inside of them suffer without ever lifting a damn finger to do something.

“You’re not wrong. But I’ve watched you suffer through the struggle a thousand, a million times even. That’s why I can’t send you back.”

“That’s the problem. You’ve *watched*, sensei. Having a first-class seat to my misery doesn’t make you familiar with shit. I was the one living through it.” Dazai’s hand comes down on the cool metal of the table, hard. “So let *me* be the one to make this decision. I don’t care what it takes. Just make it happen.”

He expects another automated ‘I can’t do that’ answer, so he feels his stomach bottom out when Natsume asks, “You’re not going to stop?”

This is it. This is his chance.

“Never.”

“You could forget.”

His brows knit into a frown. “What?”

“You could forget everything that you were, Dazai. Everything that you are. You would be back but you wouldn’t know why,” Natsume says. He is using big, scary words without actually explaining what any of them mean. Dazai does the same when he wants to get rid of someone. It’s a tactic. Either he wants to intimidate Dazai, or he wants to test his resolve, just like he did by planting him into this all-too-happy-universe. “Would that really be worth it to you?”

“You say I *could*. That means there is a chance I won’t.”

If Natsume is taken aback by the reply, he doesn’t show it. “A small one.”

“But there is one.” Even if it’s not a ploy. Even if Dazai comes back as a sentient zombie or a damned wraith, then that is simply what it takes. “Do it.”

Natsume gazes back at him, neither denying nor obliging him.

“I said do it,” Dazai snaps, his thread of patience tearing in half after too many worlds, too many timelines, and too many failed conversations with this brick of a man. “I don’t care what it takes. Do

_”

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: lots and lots of discussions that revolve around suicide, a deep dive into Dazai's suicidal ideation, uhhh... mass murder...., aftermath of a car accident... I think that's it? Let me know if I missed something!

The lesson bits from Dazai's notebook are majorly inspired by Robert Greene's 48 Laws of Power & 33 Strategies of War! :)

Chapter 45: O' Grantors of Dark Disgrace

Chapter Notes

TWs are at the end!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chuuya wakes up with a gasp. The remnants of his dream are embers in the back of his mind, burning brightly but quick to fade away. He thinks it was a good dream. Thinks he saw —

“Morning, sunshine.”

Chuuya jerks up. Stares at the man sitting next to him. “Dazai?” It comes out as a shuddering rasp.

Lying by his side, fully clothed, and propping his head up with his hand, Dazai smiles at him. “The one and only.”

“You’re — you’re here?” Chuuya’s eyes wildly dart around the room before zeroing in back on Dazai, who is alive when he should be dead. It doesn’t make any sense. He feels nauseous from the bewildering mixture of hope and uncertainty rising in his throat. “You’re —“

“Back from the dead?” Dazai nods. “Yup.” Then he stretches his arm out to Chuuya, offering him a touch. “Here, see for yourself.”

So Chuuya does. He touches Dazai’s hand like it’s the most valuable treasure in the world. It *is.* Their fingers slowly intertwine, Dazai squeezes him lovingly and he doesn’t disappear like he always does when Chuuya is dreaming about him. He doesn’t flicker out of existence. This reality doesn’t suddenly end.

Chuuya shakes his head. A breathless noise of shocked relief slips out of him. “I don’t — I don’t understand. *How*?”

How the fuck is this possible?

“In a world with dragons and Arahabakis, coming back from the dead isn’t the strangest thing that can happen. Besides,” Dazai tugs him closer by his hand until they are only a kiss apart, “I had to. Chuuya wouldn’t let me rest in peace.”

A phone starts buzzing on his nightstand. He ignores it.

Chuuya laughs then, even as something wet runs down his cheeks. “You’re back,” he whispers and cups Dazai’s stupid fucking face that he has missed like a lung. “You’re really back.”

“I’m back,” Dazai murmurs, brushing his nose with his.

Chuuya squeezes his eyes shut, still not quite able to fully process this fact.

He feels Dazai grin against his cheek. “Someone really wants to reach you, huh?”

“Let them. Fuck work. Fuck everything today. You’re *back*.”

“I didn’t leave you the Port Mafia so you’d slack off on your duties, you know.”

“Fuck off. You can be the boss now that you’re no longer fucking dead.”

“Nuh-uh. Only you know. Let’s keep it that way.”

Chuuya opens his mouth but those fucking vibrations grow more insistent. What the fuck is up with that? He draws away from Dazai with a low growl and pushes the ‘stop’ button on his phone. It doesn’t stop. He does it again and when that doesn’t work either, he crushes the damn thing into a hundred tiny pieces. But even then the sound doesn’t fucking stop.

Why won’t it stop?

Why the hell —

***

Chuuya’s eyes fly open. The ceiling stares back at him. He feels himself smiling. Feels feverish rays of hope warming him up from the inside because Dazai’s back and makes everything a tiny fraction less terrible. But when he rolls over, his bedside is empty. Untouched. And his smile slips.

Oh.

It was a dream.

Another fucking dream.

How he fucking hates these dreams.

Grief is so much more bearable when it's a straight, flat line; even something as ferocious as mourning someone can become tiring. You eventually grow sick of it. Sick of yourself. The sadness dries up, and the flesh wound turns into a scab that you pick at every now and then. Life goes on.

But these dreams…

Chuuya exhales harshly through his nose as he slides out of the bed.

Waking up from these dreams slices you in half. Makes you bleed. Suffer. Only to put you through the torment all over again the next time you close your eyes.

Chuuya's fingers clench so tightly around his phone when he presses it to his ear that it's a miracle it doesn't shatter.

"I need you to get me something," he says as soon as the person on the other line picks up. "Something to keep me awake for a while."

He is so fucking sick of Dazai haunting his dreams.

***

Piano Man places a folder on his desk. "The subjects have been taken care of."

Chuuya raises his brows. "And?"

"No trace of Dostoevsky."

Chuuya grinds his jaw. A fresh swell of anger clouds his vision for a dazed moment. "Damn it. Where the hell is he?"

The Port Mafia has concentrated its forces on locating Dostoevsky and on pulverizing the anti-ability movement since the Bishop Staff's demise. Both tasks entail corrupting some politicians, killing others, scouring their living places for any information regarding Dostoevsky as it's likely they were conspiring with him, the cooperation with other Mafia clans and underworld organizations to guarantee maximum surveillance, and beating down any individual anti-ability groups and making an example out of them.

"The only reason we caught him once was because he wanted to be found," Piano Man says, catching his eyes. "Boss, I highly doubt that

will happen a second time."

Chuuya waits a beat before speaking. "Not unless we lure him out with something that he wants."

Piano Man processes these words slowly, cautiously. Then he softly concludes, "The Book."

Chuuya nods.

"Do you know where it is?"

"It doesn't matter. As long as he thinks we have it, he'll come out."

"That's when we strike." Piano Man's forehead creases. "He will lay a thousand traps for us. Even if we catch him off-guard, which is highly unlikely, it will be a suicide mission. His ability will ensure no one will return alive."

What Chuuya doesn't tell him is that there will be no *we.* He won't be sending any of his people to their deaths because he will be the one to finish the job. But Piano Man doesn't need to know that. He is a good executive but he is an *excellent* friend and he would refuse to let Chuuya die.

He just wouldn't understand.

He doesn't need to know.

"I'm aware of our chances," Chuuya forces himself to say. "But if that's what it takes to kill the devil, it's worth the risk."

Piano Man narrows his eyes. Searches for the truth in his words. He knows that Chuuya doesn't like sacrificing his people, especially for a gamble this dicey.

"He has to die," Chuuya snaps, letting the smoldering resentment that has been festering in his blood for months now pervade his graveling voice. "He *has to*. I don't care what it takes."

"There are other ways —"

"Really? Let's hear 'em."

Piano Man presses his mouth shut.

"That's what I thought," Chuuya scoffs, exhaling a mirthless laugh. "If

there was another way, I'd use it — I don't want to send anyone on a pointless suicide mission. But we've been searching for him for months. It's time to accept that he won't come out of his hole unless we make him, so find a way to send him a message that he'll receive and then come up with a strategy to counteract every single one of his traps. You can do that, right?"

It's cruel. But it will be worth it in the end.

"I can. But I'd prefer not to help you make this mistake."

Chuuya raises his chin. "But as my executive, my subordinate, you will help me plan this mission either way. Won't you?"

Piano Man's chest sags. "I will."

"Good," Chuuya says and breaks eye contact, glancing away. "This stays between us for the time being. I expect results by next week. Until then, you're dismissed."

Piano Man stays rooted to the spot even when the silence in the room grows unbearable but Chuuya doesn't acknowledge his wordless disapproval. He doesn't have time for this shit. Or the nerves. He has made up his mind and now that he *is* the fucking boss, he will use the power that he didn't want to get his fucking way, whether his subordinates like it or not.

It's his goddamn life. He should have the choice to decide how to end it.

Eventually, just like everybody else, Piano Man yields, stiffly walking away.

Chuuya lets out a sigh once he is by himself. Scrubs a hand across his face. There is this dull ache in the back of his skull that hasn't left since the day he pushed the kill switch. It blurs his vision. Keeps the entire world off-kilter somehow. He feels drunk. Maybe because he self-medicates with a glass of wine before and after each agonizingly dull meeting he has to sit through. And maybe because liquor doesn't mix well with the coke he has been doing to keep himself awake.

It's funny how little time it took him to turn into Dazai.

He barely sees the outside of this office anymore. Doesn't let his friends come in here as often. Inhales white powder instead of sleeping.

God damn it, even Dazai's fucking death wish has contaminated him.

Then again, maybe it has been there all along.

Chuuya pours himself a new glass from the liquor cabinet and downs it one go. It's not the best way to enjoy wine. Actually, not a way to enjoy it at all because wine should be savored. The flavor should melt on your tongue. But the burn that crawls down his chest afterward makes it worth it. It also intensifies the throbbing in his head. Lets the pain wander further to the front. Chuuya ignores it as he strolls toward the bedroom.

He has a meeting with a shell company representative in half an hour. Then another one. And another one. On and on and on his tasks and responsibilities go, like a never-ending carousel. The only meeting that he cares about though is the one between him and Dostoevsky in the near future.

God, how he is looking forward to that. Wrapping his fingers around the rat's throat and —

A soft rustling noise behind him makes him stop. Frowning, he looks over his shoulder to see a folder on the ground. It was lying on the desk just now. He knows that because, when he picks it up, it's the folder that Piano Man slid over to him earlier. The mission reports.

Chuuya scans the office, searching for… what exactly he doesn't know. Maybe Jiji snuck in here. But that's absurd. No one comes in here without his permission. Not even a cat. Not Kafka either, especially because he would know the moment she did. She is way too loud and too destructive. Maybe an assassin is lurking somewhere around the corner. That wouldn't be too bad. A welcome distraction from his dreadful routine. There has been a surprising lack of assassination attempts on him so far. The few people that tried were so underwhelmingly bad at it that Chuuya hesitates to even call them that. Or maybe…

He cuts off his train of thought with a shake of his head. That kind of delusional thinking would make his sleep boycott pointless. He backs away from the desk only to hear the unnerving sound of his chair rolling across the floor.

He spins around. Swallows as he stares at the thing. It's completely still. Unmoving. Of course it is. It's a chair.

He rubs his arm over his eyes. *You need to calm down and get your shit*

together. “This isn’t real.”

Except when he lifts his head, the walls seem to breathe around him, pulsating like pockets of magma. He shakes his head. Tries to shake off the picture and this wretched sensation of losing his footing on ground that stands still.

“Stop.” Pressing his fists to the sides of his head, he tries to catch his breath, regain his composure, find his mind but all he feels is more pressure around his airway, and worse than that, he feels bright and devastating hope. What if Dazai’s here in the room with him, haunting him from the afterlife, what if it’s Dazai pushing his chair and throwing his papers around, what if Dazai is telling him to join him already, what if Dazai doesn’t want him to die killing his murderer, what if he could see Dazai again, even as a ghost, just one more time, what if —

“Stop it!” he snarls at the air. At himself. “You’re *not* real.”

Chuuya knows pain so intimately that he knows he can go head to head with Dostoevsky and win, but this — this not even he can bear a second time. He cannot hope to see Dazai again. He won’t be able to stand the crushing force of reality once he opens his eyes and sees that no one in the room but him.

He stalks toward the damned chair and grabs it before unleashing his ability upon it, slamming it into the floor and driving his foot into it over and over until the cushioning bursts forth and the spine breaks. Until it is nothing more than shattered parts.

Panting through his mouth, he skims the office once more. He finds no one and nothing. It’s just him here. He is alone.

“You’re fine,” he says with a weak nod to himself. He is alright. Dazai is dead. And soon he will be too.

***

When Chuuya decided to stop sleeping, it was so Dazai would stop haunting him, so he could finish his fucking business here without losing his mind from grief, it was not so Dazai would start haunting him while he was awake too.

But that’s the thing about ghosts. Once you become aware of their existence, you won’t forget again. He scours the tower for the Book, as a safety measure, or maybe as a distraction, and feels the shadows

bend toward him like living, breathing beings who want to prevent him from finding that damned thing. He drinks coffee and it tastes like blood. Dazai's blood. The blood of the people he has killed. He reduces the number of subordinates that he lets inside his office because they come in wearing *his* face.

He is distantly aware that he is suffering through the effects of sleep deprivation but he can't bring himself to stop because the second he falls asleep, he will forget that his dreams aren't reality. He will believe his illusions of Dazai are real before he wakes up and realizes. Like this, at least, a part of him always knows that it's not real. It hurts less. He just can't allow himself to ever hope.

Albatross, Yuan and Shirase come by several times but Chuuya tells his security detail to send them away every time. He is busy. He is sleeping. He is not there. They try to use Nami to see him anyway, but Chuuya's mind hasn't deteriorated far enough yet to not think of that first. He stays sealed inside his office, away from everyone else.

Time blurs. The sun rises and sets outside in the real world but it never quite reaches the inside of this office.

One day, his guards ask for permission to let Higuchi inside. Chuuya itches to reach for another glass of wine when he hears the double doors open and shut. Higuchi isn't on his schedule which can only mean that something happened that requires his immediate attention. She also talks way too quickly and loudly. It makes his head spin. But instead of carrying bad news, Higuchi carries Jiji — though the cat makes an escape the moment Higuchi comes to a stop in front of his desk.

"Um, I found her roaming the hallways."

According to Yuan, Jiji has been doing that a lot lately, wandering the hallway, searching for her owner. She doesn't know that he won't ever come back. She's just a cat. She doesn't comprehend such an abstract concept as death.

Chuuya blinks himself back to the present. The world around him wavers unsteadily. He feels distantly sick. He clears his throat. "Thanks. Anything else?"

Higuchi replies with a strange nod, her features contorting and stretching like putty under the dim lights. Then her gaze snaps away from him and somewhere else. Almost as if she is trapped in the same fever dream as him.

“What is it?” Chuuya asks after several flickering moments pass without an answer.

Higuchi takes a sudden step to the side with a muffled squeak in her throat. “I, um — do you feel that too?”

Chuuya has to grip the edge of his desk to keep himself from toppling over, which is strange because he is sitting but he feels like he is riding a ship in a storm. “Feel what?”

Because he feels a lot of things. The slow, borderline hypnotic beat of his heart like a drum in his ears — or a countdown — in sync with the sway of the room. The lake of blood on the floor except it’s not blood, it’s the unsettling color of the carpet. The dancing, writhing shadows that encircle Higuchi.

Only Higuchi is not supposed to be seeing any of this.

This nightmare belongs to Chuuya.

“The air — the — it’s *windy* here,” Higuchi tells him, her voice both dispersed and piercing. He watches her twist in a circle like a ballerina. Maybe not. Maybe she doesn’t move at all. “I’m sorry, boss. I think I’m coming down with a cold. That must be it.”

“Okay,” Chuuya has to say slowly so he won’t accidentally swallow the words and choke on them. “Take a day off and get better.”

“Yes, boss. Thank you, boss.”

He blinks and already, she is gone.

Chuuya wonders whether she was ever here. Whether this was just his mind playing tricks on him.

It’s not like it matters much. If anything, this sickness that grows inside him puts him closer to his destination. But he can’t let it take over. Not just yet. The thought of dying before he can put his hand through Dostoevsky’s heart is as intolerable as the thought of living a long life.

He digs his nails into the meat of his thighs until his vision stops swimming so wildly and takes several deep breaths. His heart begins to calm down.

Then something black darts past him and undoes all his progress. He

flinches, stiffening to ice, before he does a double take and realizes that it's just Jiji. Jiji is actually here. Then Higuchi must have been too. He can't remember what she wanted from him.

Jiji's hiss makes him frown even harder. Blinking, he watches her cram into the corner of the office, her back arched and her tail all puffed up. She releases a low, threatening growl when Chuuya stands up.

The cat's near-pitch-black eyes dart to him as he squats down in front of her and reaches out with a tentative hand. But her visible terror doesn't fade.

"Hey, sweet girl. What's got you so riled up, huh?"

Jiji's fur bristles. Then her head focuses not on Chuuya but on something else. On something behind him.

Time seems to stop. So does his breathing.

Chuuya feels like he is moving against a current when he slowly turns his head in the direction of Jiji's ghost. He knows of course. Of course he knows that it's a pipe dream, but that doesn't make the absence of anyone else in the office hurt any less.

No one is here.

The only thing haunting him is his own damn mind.

Jumping to his feet, he squeezes his eyes shut and brings his fingers to the sides of his head, trying to knead this delusional fever out of his skin. He breathes out a shallow, near-hysterical laugh then. Fuck, the way he must look to anyone else, stumbling around his office and talking to cats. It's like a bad movie.

"You're losing your mind," he mocks himself. "You're fucking losing it."

But the terror inside of him only grows and grows. Blindly, he staggers over to his desk and grips it, gulping down air like it will exorcize his delusions.

Jiji meows somewhere nearby. The sound carries through the room and through his skin and into his bones.

His fingers clench. But he refuses to open his eyes this time.

Jiji howls again. The ear-piercing noise makes his agitation mount.

And she just won't stop. Why won't she stop? Why does she keep torturing him? What the *fuck* does she want from him?

His breath comes out in a shudder. "Stop it… stop it, please."

But she doesn't. She just keeps yowling like her fucking tail is on fire.

"I *said*," he exclaims, slamming his fists into the desk before grabbing the nearest thing in reach, a stapler, and hurling it at the wall behind her, "shut up! Shut the fuck up! Just shut up and leave me alone!"

It thuds against the wall. Startled, Jiji scampers away, her howling turning into meows of distress until she eventually stops making any noises altogether.

The world tilts sickeningly again as Chuuya's legs grow weak underneath him. Steadying himself with one hand, he presses his other fist to his forehead and chokes out a breath. What the fuck is he doing. Why is he screaming at a cat. She's just a cat. She didn't do anything.

This realization, that he is punishing this small, innocent creature, Dazai's creature, for his own mistakes, almost brings him to his knees. Instead he stumbles forward and through the room. Searching for her to apologize and beg for her forgiveness. She didn't deserve this. She didn't deserve any of this. She's just a cat.

He finds her hiding under the long meeting table in the front. But she doesn't come out even when he sinks to his hands and knees and tries to coax her out. No, she doesn't forgive him. She probably hates him now. He doesn't blame her. He deserves this.

"I'm sorry, Jiji," he mutters, his guilt robbing him of rational thought. "It's not your fault. Not your fault that I'm losing it. You're just a cat. I'm sorry." Something warm and wet rolls down his face. "I'm so sorry."

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorryI'm sorryI'msorryI'msorryI'msosorry.

He stays on the floor, marinating in his shame and remorse, and only blinks himself out of his daze when Jiji emerges from her refuge and tentatively crawls onto his lap. He doesn't dare move until she settles down, curling up right on top of him, probably sensing his fucking

misery. He screamed at her, scared her with a stapler, and still, she has come to comfort him. More tears run down his cheeks. Drip onto her black fur.

“You just miss him, huh?”

She can’t find the one she’s looking for. Of course she is loud. Of course she is angry and sad. Her owner abandoned her.

Chuuya understands her pain all too well.

Brushing the tips of his fingers over her head, he forces out a grimacing nod. “I know. I miss him too.”

His owner abandoned him as well.

***

The world continues to spin at a speed that he cannot keep up with anymore, leaving him out of breath and painfully disorientated. His fuse has died. It won’t turn on again. But his tears dry. And once they do, he rises unsteadily to his feet and summons Piano Man into his office. It is time. No more stalling. No more finishing up business. No more delusional fever dreams.

It is time.

***

As the Port Mafia’s official representative, Lippman often holds interviews with the press that appear innocuous to the public but carry significant meaning to the underworld. The very next day, he goes on national TV in which he talks about a certain book that he has which he discovered in a certain store in a certain city that he visited on a certain date last year.

The message contains a date, a location and the temptation of the Book. It’s a long shot but Chuuya has no doubt that Dostoevsky will be able to decode it. He has been keeping a close eye on the Port Mafia this entire time, even while he has been playing with the Agency.

He will be there.

***

The day after Lippman’s interview, Chuuya receives a package addressed to Dazai Osamu. It must have been something Dazai had

ordered.

After his security detail thoroughly inspects it for any dangerous materials, Chuuya sits down behind his desk and opens it. He finds a book inside. His first suspicion is that it's The Book. But this one isn't empty and it has an author even though Chuuya has never heard of her. He flips listlessly through the pages. Maybe Dazai had just wanted something new to read. Sometimes there is no deeper meaning than this.

That is, until he sees stains of black amidst white paper.

He pauses at that particular page. Maybe it's just another delusion but even as he traces the text — half-blotted out — with the tips of his fingers, the black ink doesn't vanish.

"Where did you work five years ago?" the detective asked.

Makoto lowered her eyes, feeling guilty despite knowing that she hadn't done anything wrong. Authority figures simply intimidated her. "In an orphanage."

"City?"

"Katsuura."

"Can anyone verify this information?"

"No, the orphanage closed a few years ago."

"You don't have any papers?"

"I told you. I lost most of my belongings in the fire."

"Convenient," the detective muttered, stroking his beard. "So you say you haven't come back here in those five years — until last Monday?"

"Last Wednesday," she corrected, narrowing her eyes. Was this a tactic?

"Last Wednesday," he repeated and chewed on the end of his pencil thoughtfully. "You lived alone?"

She gave him a nod.

"What's your address now?"

"It's still the same. Um, my neighbor let me stay with her for the time

being. Until I figure out where to go."

"And the date of the fire was October the ninth, correct?"

"Correct."

Overall, it looks like someone got bored of the story and started crossing out lines, but upon looking closely the words that were left out form a message: *Orphanage. Katsuura. Closed a few years ago. Come alone. Same time and date.*

It can't be a coincidence that Chuuya received this just a day after Lippman's interview. It's from Dostoevsky. It has to be. He looks up the city on the internet. It barely takes him a minute to find out that there is only one abandoned orphanage in Katsuura. The building still sits empty to this day.

He changed the location of their meeting — and as much as Chuuya hates to say this, Dostoevsky did him a favor. The Port Mafia is preparing for a fight at an entirely different place. They will be so busy looking for a sign of Dostoevsky that no one will even notice that Chuuya has slipped away.

It's almost perfect.

***

When the day comes, Chuuya wakes up feeling more clear-headed than he has been in weeks. He has a purpose again. A visible destination rather than a road that seems to go on forever. And maybe thinking of his mission like that isn't exactly sane, hypocritical even considering how much shit he gave Dazai for almost drowning himself in a bathtub, but Chuuya has long since moved past the point of reason.

It's better to burn out and take Dostoevsky with him than to fade away, physically alive but gone on the inside. He doesn't want that. He refuses to end up like that.

He slides out of bed with intent. He steps into the shower. Brushes his teeth. Washes his face. Scrubs his body clean.

He leads the final meeting before the Dostoevsky mission, going over every step as though he isn't aware that no one will show up. He watches his people get up and leave afterward. Everything feels so much sweeter when you know it's the last time.

“Just so ya know,” Albatross says, the only one who has stayed because he likes being the last one, and throws an arm around Chuuya’s shoulder, “I think this is a good thing, boss. Means you trust us to bring that motherfucker down. We won’t let you down.”

Chuuya forces out a grim nod, not quite able to meet his eye. “Yeah. I know.”

“We’ll keep ya updated. You just hold down the fort in the meantime.” Albatross gives his arm a squeeze before sauntering away, lifting one hand as a goodbye. “See ya tomorrow ‘cause I’m not dying anytime soon.”

Chuuya tries to find Yuan and Shirase to see them one more time but in the end, he decides against it. Yuan would be able to tell that something was wrong just by looking at him. It’s too risky. He’ll just have to be fine with the last time they all saw each other when Chuuya brought Jiji back to the penthouse. It was a nice last time.

It’s better this way. God knows they’re all better off without him. He has cost them so much already.

Back in his office, he changes into the clothes that he laid out for himself. Black pants. A matching button-up. And a coat. Dazai’s coat. Chuuya unearthed it in his closet one night. It’s a smaller size than the rest. Dazai must have worn it when he was younger. Sixteen, seventeen maybe. It fits Chuuya just right. When he presses the sleeve to his nose, he pretends that it still smells like Dazai. Chuuya tops the outfit off with his hat and that’s it.

He leaves the scarf on top of his desk.

Today Chuuya isn’t the boss.

Before he dives off it to set out for Katsuura, he lets out a breath. It tastes like relief.

It’s time to go.

***

“Nakahara Chuuya,” a voice says when Chuuya enters the abandoned orphanage several hours later. The building is so run-down that it’s a surprise it’s still standing. It won’t be anymore after this encounter.

Dostoevsky is seated at a rusty table next to a stained glass window.

He greets Chuuya with an acknowledging smile. “I must say, I was not sure I would hear from you. With such a lucrative offer too.”

Chuuya stops a few feet away from the devil, his emotions strangely flat. “Not like I had much of a choice of luring you out otherwise.”

He thought that the sight of Dostoevsky would trigger every iota of pain that he has been keeping buried all these months. That coming face to face with the man responsible for Dazai’s death would make his grief finally boil over. Drown him.

Instead, there is nothing.

Maybe that’s Dostoevsky’s ability playing with his emotions once again.

Dostoevsky’s head tips to the side, considering him. “Hm. Surely Dazai’s pet has learned a thing or two from him, no?”

Dazai’s name from his mouth makes something inside of him twitch. Chuuya focuses on it even as he replies with a listless shrug and an equally listless voice. “Scheming’s not really my thing.”

“Then you’re just going to hand over The Book?”

“No,” he says. “I’m here to kill you.”

Dostoevsky’s mouth twists into a pleased smile. “Ambitious.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“And very naïve.”

Chuuya stuffs his hands into the pockets of his coat. “Let me guess. You’ve got a hundred and two ways to ensure your survival.”

“Something like that.”

“I know.”

“Interesting move,” Dostoevsky tells him with a curious frown, absently lifting the tip of his thumb to his mouth. “I’m not surprised though.” Then he motions toward the table beside him, set with an old-fashioned kettle, an arrangement of cups, and an opened box of sugar cookies. “Want to have some tea first before getting down to business?”

“No thanks.”

Chuuya is willing to die for this but only if he drags Dostoevsky along with him. Chuuya wouldn’t put it past him to pull off something as obvious as poisoning the fucking cookies.

“Suit yourself.” Dostoevsky wraps his thin, bloodless fingers around a cup, his pinky sticking out, and raises it to take a slurping sip. He sighs. A beat of loud silence passes. He glances at Chuuya. “I’ve always wondered, Chuuya. As someone who has lost so much because of your powers, have you never asked yourself what your life would be like without them?”

Chuuya doesn’t owe him a conversation before his death, let alone any answers, but he has questions of his own.

“I have,” he says after several moments.

“Yet it doesn’t torment you, does it?” Dostoevsky wonders, looking borderline honest. “How is that?”

And that’s easy.

“It’s not my ability that was so cruel. It’s the people that exploited it.”

“Without it, they would have had no reason,” Dostoevsky fires back automatically.

Chuuya stares at him. “Are you stupid or just really fucking ignorant?”

Dostoevsky’s expression closes up again before he spreads his arms and says, “Enlighten me.”

“People have always been terrible. Not all of them, sure, but a lot of them, ability or not.” Chuuya breathes out a laugh of disbelief for having to explain something so self-evident to a supposed genius. Genius he may be but that doesn’t help him to see the world for what it is with that massive god complex blocking his vision. “It doesn’t matter. You can try to erase abilities all you want, people will continue to be selfish and greedy. They’ll always find a reason to kill.”

“So I should kill all people then?”

“No, you should just kill yourself,” Chuuya mutters, growing tired of this conversation and of himself for stupidly believing that understanding Dostoevsky before killing him would have made his

grief lighter. Nothing in this world has the power to do that.

“That’s the problem. Death has no meaning in a world with abilities. You can kill me and some other version of me will continue to live in another universe.” The rattle of the teacup, when Dostoevsky places it back on the table too fast, is obscenely loud in the lonely silence of this room. “That’s wrong. It’s unnatural.”

Chuuya’s eyes narrow. “What’s it matter to you?”

Dostoevsky lifts his gaze to him. “Without death, there is no life, just like without pain, there is no sense to it all. The Book is the source of all that is wrong with this paper world and as long as abilities exist – as long as it exists – none of us will ever be able to truly live.”

“Have you considered that you’re just sick in the head?” Chuuya asks.

How selfish does someone have to be to believe that their pain is everyone else’s too?

“I have,” is the response. “And you’re right. I am. Because of the Book.”

What a bunch of bullshit.

“That’s *your* problem. Other people are perfectly fine.”

“Are *you* fine?”

Chuuya presses his lips together as his body goes cold with a fresh well of pain, nearly enough to take his breath away. His chest contracts once, twice, and another time before the worst of it passes. “I was once,” he says.

“Were you really?” Dostoevsky challenges, gazing at him with wide, hollow eyes. There is nothing inside of him. No light. No darkness. No soul. No *feelings*. No humanity. “Even when Dazai was still alive, didn’t you always feel like there is something inherently otherworldly about you?”

“That never made me want to kill hundreds of people,” Chuuya says.

“Is that not what you did to the Bishop’s Staff? What makes you so different from me?” Dostoevsky touches his chest. “I want to rid the world of abilities. You rid the world of hundreds of people to keep your people, a bunch of criminals, safe.”

Chuuya's mouth sets in a hard line. He can't deny this. Dostoevsky isn't wrong. They are not so different in the end.

"That's all our fate. At one point or another, all of us kill eventually. Because we can. No one should have that much power. It's wrong." The aggravated curl of Chuuya's fingers snaps Dostoevsky out of his monologue. He lets out a dutiful sigh. "I see you're growing impatient, so let me lay out what's going to happen: you kill me and the Hunting Dogs will arrest you the moment you walk out of the door."

So that's his safety measure.

The Hunting Dogs.

Again.

Chuuya's breath is stale with indifference. "What's stopping them from arresting me no matter what I do?"

"My word," Dostoevsky says, looking him in the eye. "The same word that I gave Dazai. I promised to give you a fighting chance and I did. Now I am offering the same to you. All I want in return is the Book. That's it."

"You still don't get it." Chuuya's mouth bends into something dried up and humorless as he crosses the room and slams a hand on the table. "I could have sent my people into this trap. I could have let the Agency deal with you. I could have done a lot of things." He stops, letting the rising tide inside of him submerge him. In his grief. His anger. His hatred. "But I didn't."

"You're not so different from Dazai then." A disheartened smile flickers across his face. "You both chose death and yet you still judge me for wanting to build a different world. A better one."

It is this that ultimately cracks Chuuya's chest open. The admission that Dazai chose death. That he took his own life. Dostoevsky pushed him toward that edge but it was no ordinary man that he pushed. It was Dazai Osamu. A genius with a brilliant, borderline frightening mind. If anyone could have found a way off that rooftop, it would have been Dazai. He could have come up with something. Anything. But he didn't.

He chose death.

And it's not anger that spills over. Not betrayal for being left behind.

Not resentment for the promise that was broken. It's sorrow.

Pure and utter devastating sorrow.

No matter how grand Dazai seemed, he was only human, and humans bleed; humans hurt; humans die. Dazai was in pain. He had been for a long time. It used to infuriate Chuuya. So what if life hurts? At least it's *something*. It's better than not feeling anything at all, to pass through this world without touching anything like Dostoevsky.

But he gets it now. Everyone has a limit. Chuuya has reached his. Here at the end, without a leader or a purpose, he has nothing left to fight for anymore.

"You see it," Dostoevsky whispers, eyes alight by something invisible, "don't you?"

Chuuya looks back at him. He does. He sees what Dostoevsky finds so wrong with this world. A part of him understands.

But sorrow is just the catalyst.

His spine straightens. His hand lifts.

A shadow of apprehension flickers across Dostoevsky's face – there and gone like the wick of a flame. It makes something satisfying curl in Chuuya's stomach before he doubles over from the pain that lances through him. Dostoevsky. His ability. His shield. He can use it to weaken anyone. Can use it to kill them even.

This was his actual plan.

Maybe the Hunting Dogs are part of it too but this, Dostoevsky killing Chuuya through a sheer excess of physical agony, was the main strategy.

Pained, wild laughter bursts from Chuuya. He tastes blood in his mouth. He grins through it.

He pries his heavy eyes open and finds Dostoevsky's face turning bloodless as he comes to the same realization. Chuuya knows pain. Knows it intimately. It has accompanied him all his life. Pain cannot kill him. Not like it kills other people.

"You see it," he spits out mockingly, "don't you?"

He doesn't wait for an answer.

Using the momentum, he stalks forward and thrusts his hand into Dostoevsky's chest. His insides are wet. Hot. A choked gurgle comes out of his mouth.

Gritting his teeth, Chuuya strains against the devastating force that weakens him and doubles down, digging his fingers deeper into Dostoevsky's chest to find his heart so he can crush it. He leans down to whisper in his ear. "Not having any pain doesn't make you a god. It just makes you dead."

Dostoevsky's lips move but only a low, pitiful rasp comes out. Whatever it was, he never gets to say it. Chuuya watches the life bleed out of him. He doubts there was anything inside, to begin with. His eyes are as hollow, when he slumps back, as they were minutes ago.

Somewhere, in the near distance, he hears the sound of chopper blades. The muffled noise of a voice saying something through a megaphone. He sees the lights shine inside the empty apartment. But all of it seems to happen worlds away. And Chuuya stands there with his hand inside a dead man's chest, eyes blurred with tears because it doesn't matter. It doesn't bring anyone back. It's just another end of a chapter. Nothing less and nothing more than that.

Allowing his eyes to rest, he lifts his chin.

Somewhere out there, Dazai is watching him. Has been watching him all along. Somewhere out there, he is waiting for him to come home to their little house in the middle of a vineyard, just like Verlaine and Rimbaud's — and Chuuya has never thought he would enjoy living in the countryside, but suddenly it's the only thing he wants. He will come home and find Dazai in the kitchen, making dinner. He burned the tofu but it's still good. They will eat together, then go outside to watch the sunset, sharing cigarettes and a bottle of wine, and it will be a boring, quiet life but a good one. It will be a good one. It will be the life neither of them ever got to have. It will be so good.

"I'll see you soon," he breathes out as the windows around him shatter. "O' grantors of dark disgrace…" Something explodes. Fills the room with a cloud of sickly sweet smog. "… do not…" Chuuya feels the world sway sideways, so deceptively familiar that he mistakes it for corruption. "… not wake me…"

… *again.*

***

A heart is beating, painfully loud like a large drum beating right next to his ear. Chuuya blinks in the direction of the noise, but of course, there is no heart anywhere.

Not in this place, where humanity is absent.

Another electric current sends Chuuya's body into convulsions. It boils his body fluids until nothing remains. Except something always remains because it never stops. It keeps on going.

He no longer resists. Has stopped resisting after the second time they brought him into this room to coax Arahabaki out of him. He wanted to die, so why endure this pain. Why not let them have his singularity, so he could have his rest. Only that in his confused state of mind, pumped full of various drugs and adrenaline and pain, he didn't realize that activating corruption would not be the end.

He let go. He felt it come to life like a flesh-eating parasite inside of him, eating its way through his innards until his entire world was reduced to pain. And then it stopped. But instead of dying, he woke up in a cell. One ankle chained to the leg of his cot. Unable to reach his ability no matter how much he tried to summon it.

N paid him a visit afterward. How the man had survived the explosion that had blown up the research facility that created him, Chuuya didn't know. Didn't care about either. Not as N's words washed over him. The aim of their experimentation was to overwrite Chuuya's personality, so they could finally gain control of Arahabaki, N said. That Chuuya let Arahabaki out was a first step. They were all very pleased that Chuuya cooperated with them, N said. But he needed to go one step further and let go of himself too now. Or else Arahabaki would remain under his control and that wouldn't do.

It was when N mentioned some kind of drug that they modeled after France's singularity research that Chuuya understood why using corruption didn't kill him even though they had no one to nullify it. Verlaine used to control his singularity with the help of drugs too.

It was also then that it dawned on Chuuya that this would never end. They would make him summon Arahabaki over and over again without granting him the mercy of death. He would be trapped here until they deemed him to have served his purpose.

He stopped resisting. Let them overwrite his personality. It was as close to death as he would come in this place.

And yet, death never came.

They haven't figured out what the problem is but they are working on a solution, N promised him. In the meantime, the experiments continue. So does the pain. And the hallucinations. They have followed him even here. He sleeps here. He has no choice but to sleep when he passes out in his cell. They must be a side-effect of all the drugs they pump into him. They suck time dry of all meaning. No longer is it a straight line moving in one singular direction. Now it has turned into a circle with Chuuya at the center. Sometimes he is stuck in the past, reliving old arguments that have long since finished, and other times he floats in an ambiguous future, ending conversations that have not even begun. Most of the time though, he talks to ghosts who belong neither here nor there.

He probably speaks to Dazai more now than he did even when Dazai was still alive. Sometimes their talks feel so real that they overshadow everything else, allowing him to share a cigarette with Dazai under the stars. That's the beauty of surrender. It brings relief.

Today's session hasn't lasted long enough yet for his pain to metamorphize into fantasies. But Chuuya hasn't heard from N in a while either. That's another hallucination, not having to listen to that goddamn voice, always so detached and clinical, sometimes even chipper.

Time is a strange concept in this place. He has no idea how long it has been since he killed Dostoevsky. Days? Weeks? Months? Is the Port Mafia searching for him somewhere right now? They must be.

When he left without saying goodbye, it was so they wouldn't stop him from completing his mission. They wouldn't have let him die. Now they don't even know what happened to him and he won't die anytime soon anyway. What an ironic twist of fate.

Sometimes he wonders whether he did die that night and this is his personal afterlife. Chuuya lets his head droop between his shoulders. If this is hell, god knows he has earned a spot here.

N's voice doesn't return. Chuuya's mind must be drifting.

The next thing he sees is someone's fingertips.

Chuuya sluggishly lifts his head. A guard pulls the stake out of him. Already time to go back to his cell. To hallucinate time passing by in an instant is nice but he can't help but wish he saw Dazai instead. He

doesn't just bring an absence of pain but real, tangible enjoyment. Chuuya doesn't feel empty when he talks to him. Doesn't feel like a lab guinea pig on a break. He feels human with him.

The guard removes the electrodes next before ripping the barbed wire off his wrists as well as pulling out all the tubes in his spine. Such a long process. They could have come up with a more efficient way to study their lab rat. Used to it though, Chuuya lets it happen, his mind too clotted and his limbs too heavy to flinch every time something hurts. It always hurts anyway.

But his eyes fly open when the guard places his hand on Chuuya's back. It's not the gesture itself that shocks him. Scientists are curious creatures. They stop to marvel at the results they get, ask him invasive questions, and touch his body like he is an otherworldly artifact. Even the guards, whose only job is to protect the facility and the people in it, sometimes take their time when they get their fingers around his wrist. But their touches are cautious, downright terrified. The harder their clutch is, the more in control they feel. They never touch him this gently though.

The hand on his back is a steady, yet patient weight.

Chuuya has not been touched gently in so long that he craves to lean into it. He doesn't.

The guard's face is covered by a mask that leaves no features exposed. Chuuya doesn't know why the researchers don't hide themselves like that too. Maybe because the guards are the ones who have to bring Chuuya in and out of his cell. *They* bear the risk of getting attacked. The researchers are always safely tucked away behind steel doors and shatterproof glasses.

The guard's face is covered by a mask, so Chuuya can't see their face and who knows what's hiding there. The absence of violence doesn't translate to kindness.

Considering another possibility doesn't even occur to him until the guard steers him out of the experimentation chamber, down the hallway, and *past* the turn that leads to his cell. Chuuya stiffens but swallows the noise of confusion in his throat.

It's possible that they have changed his routine. Maybe they found a solution to their problem and it involves a new nightmare. Or maybe they have relocated him to another cell.

There are all kinds of explanations and every single one of them evaporates when Chuuya sees another guard lying on the ground, unconscious, no, *dead*, his neck broken, and the hand on his back doesn't even twitch. It calmly leads Chuuya past the dead man, down the hallway, toward an unknown destination.

His heart begins to beat then.

It's a rescue mission. The Port Mafia has somehow found it. Could it be that?

It could be. If they had tried hard enough, they could have located Chuuya in this rotten place to break him out. They have the resources. The sharp minds to accomplish such a feat. The motivation.

But what are the chances?

What's more likely is that someone else found him. Another devil that wants to get his hands on the singularity inside of him. Maybe Dostoevsky didn't die that night. Perhaps he did what Dazai couldn't do and he faked his death. Let Chuuya kill a plastic puppet instead of him. Maybe it's not Dostoevsky but one of his followers or collaborators. Maybe it's someone else entirely.

Chuuya doesn't know who it is. He can't see underneath the mask and attacking this person right now, while the shackle around his ankle denies him access to his ability and he is too weak from pain to run, let alone fight, would be stupid. He has to wait for the right moment.

That moment comes when they take a turn and an elevator appears at the end of the corridor.

Chuuya flexes his fingers. Summons whatever strength he has left as he braces himself for a violent confrontation.

Fingers softly rap against his spine. The gesture feels playful somehow. Mocking.

His captor must be expecting the same thing.

No matter. It's either now or never.

The elevator doors slide open moments after the person presses the button. As soon as they close, Chuuya grabs the guard by the collar, desperation fueling his strength, and slams him against the wall before hissing, "Take off your mask."

The stranger lifts both of his hands as if to say ‘I’m listening.’ Chuuya only gives him enough space to grip the edge of his mask and peel it off.

But the moment the mask falls away and reveals the face underneath, Chuuya’s clutch falters. His vision tilts before it comes to a jarring stop, reducing the entire world to this very instant.

“Dazai?” he whispers.

“You know,” the man standing in front of him with an amused half-smile says, “when I made you the boss, I didn’t mean ‘go on a suicide mission and let yourself be captured by a bunch of mad scientists.’”

Chuuya tries to speak but only a choked whimper comes out. It’s impossible. This can’t be real. He is hallucinating again. He has to be. He must be still back in the experimentation chamber. Except –

His fingers, shaking from shock, lift to Dazai’s face. Touch his skin. Feel the shape of his cheekbones, his jawline, his chin –

“You’re not seeing things.” Dazai catches his eyes, gaze unwavering. “It’s real. I promise you, it’s real.”

Chuuya has had many frighteningly vivid dreams of reuniting with Dazai but never was the illusion of him so self-aware.

For the first time in a long time, he dares to hope — and something snaps. With a ragged noise in his throat, Chuuya throws his arms around Dazai and buries his face in his neck until it is wet with his tears. “You’re really here.”

“I’m here,” Dazai murmurs back, cupping the back of his head.

“But — you’re –” Chuuya draws away to look at him, grasp his face again, make sure he isn't just having the cruelest hallucinations yet. So many questions and words crowd his mouth that they almost spill over. “I don’t understand. You were *dead*.”

It’s the way Dazai grimaces, so full of guilt dressed up as humor, so typically *Dazai*, that wins him over. Chuuya’s fantasies of him were always a little too perfect, showing him a sculpture of the man rather than the real thing. But this…

“Kind of a long story. Mind if I tell you later?”

Chuuya's nerves are too fried to form a coherent response. He just rasps out an uncertain, "Sure?"

Dazai mirrors his breathless laughter as he presses their foreheads together. Chuuya clings to his arms, still trying to process what is happening. Whether this is happening at all. Dazai pulls away far too quickly. "How much strength do you have?" he asks, cupping his cheek.

"A bit. My ability — the thing around my ankle —" Dazai sinks to his feet before he even finishes his sentence, fishing a key out of a chest pocket and using it to unlock the device. "… nullifies it."

Chuuya feels the exact moment his ability comes back to him. A surge of heat that doesn't hurt for once. His fists clench and unclench.

"A bit will have to be enough. Just strike whoever is in the way and follow my lead. I'll get you out of here." Back to his full height, Dazai gives Chuuya's face a reassuring squeeze. His fingers linger there for a second like he doesn't quite believe that this isn't happening either. "I promise."

The elevator comes to a stop.

Shoving aside his dizzying bewilderment for later, Chuuya nods.

Then the doors slide open and the shooting starts.

Chapter End Notes

TWS:
- hallucinations
- torture & human experimentation
- a scene with gore toward the middleish...end?
- suicidal ideation (a lot of it) and a suicide attempt
- I think that's it? Lemme know if I forgot something

OKAY..... so I am very nervous posting this but I hope you guys liked it. Don't worry guys, it's real..... next chapter, you (and Chuuya) will find out how Dazai came back exactly bc that story isn't quite finished yet... but of course you'll also get all the feels <33333333333333

Chapter 46: Memento Mori

Chapter Notes

> Hello my dear friends and readers, today I bring you another chapter <3 you can find the TWs in the end notes. Have fun!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The doors slide open and the shooting starts.

"Duck!" Dazai shouts, yanking Chuuya down to the ground as he retrieves the gas grenade he had stolen earlier, tossing it into the corridor. “Close your eyes. Take my hand.”

As soon as their fingers connect, Dazai starts running, weaving them through a fog of coughing scientists, and down the dim hallway, painted with black-and-yellow hazard stripes.

“Intruders detected within the facility,” an automatic voice warns over the facility’s speaker system. “All intelligence officers present are to destroy specified documents, then leave the facility immediately. OPS Division members are to be armed and waiting in position. This is not a drill. I repeat. This is not a drill.”

Chuuya’s fingers tighten around him. Dazai squeezes him and pulls him around the corner —

A squadron of armed guards faces them. They barely have the time to raise their weapons before Chuuya tosses them into the air and slams them into the ground with a violent *crack*. He leaves no survivors.

“That’s a bit to you?” Dazai exhales but when he stops to look for Chuuya, not by his side anymore, his smile slides off his face.

Chuuya is bent over, a line of dark red running down his mouth, staining his clenched teeth.

“Hey, don’t push yourself too hard.” Tossing Chuuya’s arm over his shoulder, Dazai helps him up, ignoring the way the stubborn idiot tries to push him away. “Just make sure to stay bulletproof and leave the rest to me.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re in pain.”

“I’m *not* letting you die again,” Chuuya snaps, voice raw.

Dazai swallows his guilt and saves it for later when they’ll have more than enough time to have this conversation. First, they need to get out of this laboratory though.

Keeping a tight clutch around Chuuya, he guides them through the maze of hallways, relying on the blueprints he has been studying for the past three days. Their run to the exit is abnormally easy. No more guards intercept them. No traps await them. No nothing. While Dazai made sure to facilitate their escape by taking out a particular set of people and devices in advance, he could only do so much before someone would have noticed an intrusion and sounded the alarm, sealing Chuuya away before he could have even gotten his hands on him. This isn’t just Dazai’s doing, no.

This is too easy on purpose.

“Something’s off,” Chuuya says, coming to the same conclusion when they reach the final elevator that will take them to the highest level: outside. His nostrils, red with dried blood, flare. “They’re letting us escape.”

Dazai uses a stolen ID card to gain access; inside the elevator, he reaches into his vest and obtains another gas grenade. “They will most likely be waiting for us as soon as the doors open. We’ll use this first but the guards will have gas masks, so we’ll have to –”

“Let me.”

Pausing, Dazai looks to the side. Chuuya doesn’t meet his gaze, glaring straight ahead with his mouth set in a hard line, metrically clenching and unclenching his fingers.

“I have ways to take care of this. I came prepared.”

“Let,” Chuuya hisses through gritted teeth, “me.”

When he finally does allow their eyes to connect, Dazai’s arguments snag in his throat. He isn’t naive. He knew with a vicious clarity that finding Chuuya wouldn’t suddenly undo the damage that has been done, but seeing the battered ruins of the man he left behind all those months ago robs him of rational thought. He feels sick — and it is as disorienting as it is comforting.

“Fine,” Dazai relents after a loaded beat of silence. “But the moment you feel off, you tell me, and I’ll take care of the rest.”

Chuuya nods grimly.

Time to play.

The doors begin to slide open, flooding the artificial glow with bright daylight. He tosses the gas grenade out first. Chuuya raises his arm. Dazai anticipates the familiar violence of *For the Tainted Sorrow*. Instead, markings start to swell on his skin like undulating snakes.

Corruption.

Dazai jerks toward him without thinking but Chuuya’s head snaps to him in warning and a pair of *lucid* eyes flash at him. “I’ve got this.”

Dazai has no time to think about the implications before a deafening chorus of fired bullets and shouted orders drowns out everything else.

“The sedative,” they scream as soon as they see the hole that Chuuya tears into the fabric of the universe. “Disarm him with the sedative!”

Chuuya hisses out an enraged snarl and the black hole widens so drastically that the noise dies out within the blink of an eye, filling the air with an unsettling silence. Just a second ago, a dozen soldiers were drawing their guns but no weapon in this world, no matter how innovative, stands a chance against the raw power of corruption. They’re gone. Devoured.

“There will be more,” Dazai mutters, giving Chuuya a cautious pat on the back, saving the flutter of awe in his throat for later. “Come on.”

Panting, Chuuya turns to face the facility though.

Dazai narrows his eyes before understanding dawns on him. Well, this is one way to make sure no one follows them.

Chuuya’s gaze darts to the side, meeting Dazai’s. He inhales sharply. “They’ll never stop.”

“I know.”

“What,” Chuuya says with dried-up mockery in his tone, curling his lips into a sardonic smile. “No speech about saving my soul?”

“No speech,” Dazai tells him, softly shaking his head. “The only thing

I'm worried about is saving you. I don't know if your body can handle another round of corruption in your state."

Chuuya spits out a scoff before leveling his glare back to the research facility and lifts his arm; his clothes fluttering with the wind that begins to rise within him. "I'll handle it."

Dazai watches in fascination as he opens up another tear in the universe and directs it at the run-down shack that hides the monstrosity underneath; it eats away at the tools, at the elevator, at the ground, swallowing more and more — and it eats away at Chuuya. His face is contorted in pain, eyes screwed shut. His nose starts bleeding again.

"It's gone." Corruption has dug a yawning pit into the ground where the research facility once resided — but Chuuya keeps going, his mouth twisted into a wild grimace. Crossing the distance between them, Dazai grabs his face; shakes him. "It's gone. That's *enough*."

Chuuya jerks out of it — and instantly goes limp between Dazai's fingers, slumping against his chest. "Chuuya. You okay?"

"Fine," he rasps back even though he can hardly stand. Still, he stubbornly curls his fists in Dazai's vest to keep himself upright.

"Fine, my ass," Dazai mutters and scoops him up in his arms, ignoring his slurred protests. A significant stretch of forest lies between them and Dazai's car, and even though no one is left to follow them, he prefers not to take any chances and linger. "I told you not to overdo it. Why don't you ever listen to me, huh?"

"'n I told you," Chuuya weakly fires back, wiping at his bloodied nose. "Am not gonna let you die again."

"I'm not going to die, you little idiot."

"'s what you said last time too 'n then – then you did. You *died*."

Dazai doesn't reply, channeling his energy into moving one foot in front of the other first. When he at last reaches the car, he one-handedly unlocks it; then sets Chuuya down in the passenger seat but pauses, meeting the simmering grief in Chuya's gaze. "I came back," he says, mouth twisting into something sad and tentative, "didn't I?"

Doesn't that count for anything?

Chuuya inhales a shallow breath like he is about to cuss him out — and suddenly his eyes roll back, his body starting to convulse violently.

Dazai freezes, dread twisting in his guts.

Seizure.

Chuuya is having a seizure.

Reaching over, Dazai moves the seat back to create more space and rolls him onto his side.

He thinks he remembers hearing once that you're supposed to do that when someone is having a seizure. Chuuya continues to shake, his head lolling sideways. The picture almost paralyzes Dazai as his mind races for solutions and comes up with nothing except holding him gently and making sure he doesn't hurt himself. It shouldn't be strange anymore, seeing Chuuya helpless and out of control. That is exactly what happens, what *happened*, every time he used corruption. But this is wildly different. This isn't the work of a singularity taking over. This can't be stopped with a touch of Dazai's skin. Here, he can't do anything except watch and hope for fate to show mercy — and even though he should be used to that by now, too, he still hates it just as much as the times before.

"You're okay," he murmurs, cradling Chuuya's head in his hands. "You're safe. I've got you. You just hold on, you hear me?"

Twitch by twitch, Chuuya's muscles begin to relax. The seizure lasted perhaps a minute or two but it feels like it has been hours once Chuuya goes still at last, his breathing evening out.

Stroking the hair out of his face, Dazai holds him close for a moment longer. Just to be sure. It must be a side-effect of the physical torment that Chuuya has been put through. The experiments. The fact that he is somehow able to control corruption.

Verlaine was able to do that too, Dazai remembers — at the price of becoming a drug addict.

That doesn't make it any less concerning though. Was this Chuuya's first-ever seizure? Was it his tenth? How much more can he handle before it becomes too much — before it kills him?

After pressing a kiss to his forehead, slick with sweat, Dazai makes

sure he is comfortable, fastens his seat belt, and gets behind the wheel. They have to leave. He can ponder what to do on the road.

Chuuya remains unconscious for a concerning amount of time. Dazai almost redirects their route to a hospital rather than their original destination when Chuuya finally stirs awake. His eyelids flutter a few times, then open. A weak grimace envelops his face.

Dazai's chest sags with relief. He swallows before saying, "You're okay. We got out."

"What…" Chuuya sits up with a disoriented squint. "What the hell happened?"

"You had a seizure."

"Well, shit," Chuuya mutters.

"Yeah," Dazai can't help but agree, though the amusement escapes them both. "Has that happened before?"

"Don't think so."

"You don't think?"

"I don't know, okay?" Chuuya's voice grows harsher. "Don't know whether anything I remember from that place is real or a…" He shakes his head. "Delirious fever dream."

"Then I'm taking you to a hospital," Dazai announces. If there is a risk that this is more serious, Chuuya needs to be treated.

"I'm a nationwide terrorist. I can't go to the hospital."

"They don't have to know that."

"I'll be fine."

"You just said –"

"It's probably the drugs." Chuuya makes a pained sound like talking too much hurts him. It probably does. Massaging his forehead, he pushes on though. "They gave me drugs that allowed me to use corruption without dying. Fine and well when I'm on 'em but a few hours without…" His breath comes out as a humorless laugh. "Is a motherfucker and a half."

“You’re in withdrawal,” Dazai concludes. As a teen, he tried to die by inhaling cocaine and a bunch of other amphetamines like air for a few days, then going stone-cold sober from one day to another. He remembers giving up and snorting a line on the bathroom floor after having a seizure.

Chuuya confirms his theory with a bleak nod.

“Probably the same drugs that Verlaine used to take.” Drugs that he was also able to stop taking, Dazai thinks as his fingers drum against the steering wheel. “The good news is that withdrawal shouldn’t kill you. The bad news is that we will have to get them out of your system first. It’s not going to be pretty.”

Chuuya leans his head against the window. He looks so exhausted. “When is it ever.”

Part of it is Dazai’s fault.

No, who is he kidding, all of it is his fault. This life. This misery. It all started the day Dazai offered Chuuya Shirase walking free in exchange for his hand in marriage.

The Sheep might have been oblivious and ignorant to a selfish degree; the life Chuuya had with them was easier though. He didn’t have a penthouse and an army of soldiers to lead but he never wanted that. He just wanted to keep his friends safe.

Dazai robbed him of the mundane life he could have had when he chose him as his predecessor and all because he didn’t want to be so alone in the months that were supposed to be the last of his life. He was selfish too.

He still is.

If he wasn’t, he would have arranged for someone else to break Chuuya out of that laboratory and give him the chance to still make something out of his life without Dazai in it. That would have been the selfless choice.

But that is not something Dazai has ever been. So he puts on a brave face and reaches over to give Chuuya’s knee a reassuring squeeze. “We’ll get through it. It’ll be fine.” His response is only a faint sigh. “How are you feeling now?”

“Head hurts.”

“You should get some rest.”

“Where are we going?”

“A place safe, where no one will find us for a while.”

He thinks he sees Chuuya suppress a violent twitch out of the corner of his vision but when he looks to the side, Chuuya isn’t seizing again, just resting. An odd, borderline cold, tension radiates off him but that’s to be expected. He has been through physical and emotional hell, and now he’s starting to feel the effects of withdrawal. Anyone would be angry in his situation.

They drive in silence.

Chuuya tries to stay awake; Dazai sees him jolt himself back to consciousness a couple of times but after a while, the exhaustion gets the best of him. He nods off. Good. He will need that rest for what is about to come.

Dazai only wakes him when they arrive at their destination. “Hey, we’re there,” he says and offers Chuuya a hand. “Can you walk?”

Chuuya blinks, clearly unsettled, but nods and climbs out of the car. His footsteps, the way he warily scans his surroundings, even his breath – all of it is stiff. He moves with the slow caution of prey near its predator.

Dazai doesn’t question it for now; instead, he nods toward the motel, a run-down sign naming it *The Setting Sun.* “This way.”

Dazai has been renting a room here for a few days now. He has ensured that the building will be very sparsely visited to avoid any unnecessary casualties and onlookers. The hallways are accordingly deserted, and the silence between them grows more and more unbearable with each second.

After Dazai lets them into their room, he takes a breath and turns to Chuuya to address this palpable tension. He doesn’t get to. Chuuya punches him first.

Dazai stumbles back in surprise, barely able to lift a hand before Chuuya throws himself at him with a wild cry and starts beating down on him.

“Chuuya!” Dazai blocks the first few hits but it’s like Chuuya is

possessed by a mindless beast of rage that doesn't listen to reason. "Chuuya, stop it!"

"You're not real!" Chuuya snarls and drives his fist into Dazai's cheek again. "Go away! Leave me alone!"

What the hell?

Dazai manages to grab one wrist, then the other, staring at Chuuya with wide, pleading eyes as he keeps him from breaking free. "I am. I swear to you, I'm real."

"You're *dead*."

"Yes, but — listen to me, you're in withdrawal and confused, but It's fine, I'll —"

"That's right, I am fucking confused because you're not real. You're *never* real." Chuuya trashes so hard that Dazai has to flip them over and pin his arms to the floor. It only makes him resist harder. He starts *screaming*. "Let me go! Let me go! Let go of me you're not real, not real, not real, not –"

Dazai sacrifices one arm to cover Chuuya's mouth with his hand only for Chuuya to bite him and seize the moment to grasp Dazai's throat and start choking him. "Why can't you just leave me *alone*?"

Dazai blindly rams his elbow into Chuuya's face. Rolls away from him. Chuuya's hand comes away with blood when he touches his face. This isn't good. Chuuya's body has been through enough strain today — another fight could seriously harm him. Dazai needs to end this quickly.

"I already gave you everything," Chuuya whispers to himself on his hands and knees. "What more do you want?"

"I know," Dazai says, carefully righting himself with both hands in the air. "You gave more than enough. All I want now is for you to rest. That's it. I promise you, Chuuya."

Chuuya levels a resentful glare at him.

Dazai takes another step toward him. "That's all I want."

"You want me to rest."

"Yes, *rest*. That is all."

Another step.

“Killing yourself wasn’t good enough? Now you want me to join you in the afterlife?!”

“That’s not – I’m not trying to kill you, Chuuya! I swear! Please, believe me!”

But it’s useless. Chuuya looks at him and all he sees is a vengeful hallucination that wants him dead.

But he is also weak and exhausted and Dazai relies on that when he shoots forward and grabs Chuuya from behind, pulling him into a chokehold. “This is for your own good,” Dazai murmurs as Chuuya wheezes and struggles against him like a wild animal. “Just let go for now. Let go and you’ll finally get some rest, yeah?”

Each second drags and drags. Dazai’s chest shudders in relief when Chuuya finally goes slack in his arms, head lolling back against him. For a few dead-silent moments, Dazai just sits there, catching his breath, holding him.

He knew withdrawal wasn’t going to be pretty. He just didn’t expect it to be this bad.

After putting himself back together, he places Chuuya on the bed, puts the ability-nullifying device back around his ankle, and cuffs his hands to the bedpost, ignoring the sickened twist of his heart. Only until Chuuya grows lucid enough to realize that Dazai’s real. Only until then.

He steals some hand lotion from the reception and rubs it into Chuuya’s skin so that it won’t chafe too much once he wakes up and, inevitably, starts to struggle against the cuffs. He wipes away his dried blood with a cotton pad and warm water. Cleans the rest of his face too. The small fridge is stocked with enough food and water for a couple of days. He made provisions for their stay, though what he anticipated to be a small holiday that they would spend talking has turned into a drug rehabilitation clinic.

Oh well.

There isn’t much to do after that. Dazai lies down on the bed, leaving a precautionary distance between them. Just in case Chuuya wakes up and tries to kick him to death. Then he closes his eyes and rests. As much as he can anyway.

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When he stirs again, lifting his head and yawning, Chuuya's eyes are open but unfocused, set on something invisible that Dazai can't see.

"How are you feeling?"

Silence.

Dazai sits up with a sigh. "Look, I'm still here. Would a hallucination be able to do that?"

"Shut up," Chuuya mutters absently.

"I don't think I will. Just…" Dazai reaches out and touches his face, stroking his thumb over his flesh. "Doesn't this feel real to you?"

Chuuya's head slowly turns to him. The crimson ocean of grief that festers in his eyes silences every thought of Dazai's except for one.

What have they done to you?

No.

What have I *done to you?*

If corruption is a singularity among abilities, then Chuuya is an anomaly among human beings. Everyone suffers at one point or another, no one leaves this earth untouched by pain, but usually there is some kind of balance – and if there isn't, the suffering corrupts peoples' hearts. But Chuuya…

Chuuya's heart has always been so stubbornly red, even after a lifetime of violence, injustice, and exploitation. The thought that Dazai might have been the one to suck him dry of his light once and for all fills him with sickening dread.

Dazai's fingers falter before falling away completely, guilt setting his skin alight like a scorching, unforgiving sun.

"You always feel real. That's the problem."

"I'm sorry," he whispers.

"So leave."

Dazai climbs off the bed and runs a hand through his hair. "I can't do

that."

"Why not? What the *hell* do you want from me?"

"Nothing. I want nothing."

"Then why are you here?"

"To help you get through this."

"You're not helping me with anything," Chuuya snaps and uselessly tugs at the handcuffs before hissing out a breath. "You're just here to watch me suffer. Like *always*."

Dazai leans against the wall on the opposite end of the room, his mouth in a tight line. He wishes there was something he could say to convince Chuuya that he is real and not just a hallucination of his subconscious but every word of his only enrages Chuuya more. Only hurts him more. Perhaps it's better to say nothing at all.

The silence, however, rubs Chuuya the wrong way too. His lips curl into a sneer. "You just can't stay away, huh? Even in death. You just have to drag me down with you, always, because – what? Ruining my life wasn't enough? You've now got to haunt me from the afterlife as well?"

Every word lands like a punch. Maybe Dazai is hallucinating too and this place is hell, after all.

"Well, guess what," Chuuya goes on, voice rising, "I'm *sick* of it. I'm done grieving you. I'm done tearing myself apart for someone who would have never done the same for me. For someone who couldn't even stay alive for me. I'm done, Dazai! I'm done!"

Dazai shakes his head and looks away. "You don't mean that."

"I mean every fucking word, you piece of shit!"

"You're angry and you're in pain –"

"I'm only in pain because you won't leave me alone!"

"That won't change if I leave."

"Everything will change. It already did. Because. You. Already. Left."

It's not wise to argue with a man on the brink of insanity but the

question snaps out before Dazai can stop it. “And did that make you happier?”

“Yes.”

Perhaps Dazai just enjoys the way this one word slices through his soul, making him feel so terribly and dreadfully alive.

“I stopped being a pawn,” the handcuffs rattle against the headboard as Chuuya leans forward to glare at him with a sadistic gleam underneath the cold sweat and the fever, “your pawn. You couldn’t use me anymore, tug me around whichever way you wanted to. I was finally *free* and it felt fucking fantastic.”

Chuuya may be under the influence of the withdrawal but isn’t what he is saying still the truth? It’s his subconscious speaking, the place where all the things that don’t get to see the light of day reside.

And it’s not like Dazai doesn’t know this either. He does. He has always known. His greed has just always been bigger than his conscience.

“I did use you, Chuuya,” he admits. “And I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve any of it.” A pause. “You didn’t deserve me.”

“Fuck your apologies,” Chuuya hisses back. “They don’t change shit.”

“I know. I’m sorry anyway.”

“Then fuck *you*.”

Dazai accepts that with a nod.

“Fuck you for roping me into the Mafia.

“Fuck you for turning my friends against me.

“Fuck you for letting me kill them.

“Fuck you for making me care while planning to die the entire time.

“Fuck you for making me take the job that sucked the life out of you.

“Fuck you for making a promise that you didn’t want to keep.

“Fuck you for not trying.”

Every accusation nails Dazai to the wall behind him. He doesn't try to dodge anything this time though. In a way the throb that follows each strike is cathartic. What is the point of a second chance if not to avoid making the same mistakes?

Still, he isn't ready for the final blow when it comes.

"But most of all," Chuuya's voice has reduced to a hoarse rasp, "fuck you for leaving me. *Fuck you*, Dazai." His mouth snaps open but the only thing that comes out is a ragged gasp before the tears that have been pooling in his eyes spill over, running down his face in endless rivers.

Dazai has always appreciated the beauty of destruction and deficiency, finding comfort in the fact that he isn't the only one running around with rotten flesh. Maybe that is why he inevitably spoils everything he touches. He just seeks company in his suffering.

But looking at Chuuya gasping for air that Dazai has robbed him off, his only wish is to be alone in his suffering again. To take it all back. To *give* it back, that light he has stolen so selfishly.

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The personal taunts eventually turn into vicious jabs that no longer have anything to do with Dazai. Their sole aim is to break free, return to the laboratory and get another hit of the drug that his body craves so fervently. Dazai lets him speak most of the time. Arguing is useless. Sheer frustration with no reward. Instead, he focuses his efforts on getting food and water into Chuuya's body to keep him healthy. An entire day passes like this: with hardly any sleep and no progress.

Once Chuuya runs out of cruel things to say, his rage transforms into desperation. He begs Dazai to let him go. His screams so loud and raw with agony that Dazai almost knocks him out in helpless despair. Then, after hours upon hours, Chuuya starts hitting the back of his head against the wall in an attempt to… what it is that he hopes to achieve, Dazai isn't sure exactly.

Getting under Dazai's skin to finally best him? Stopping the pain? Dying?

Dazai has no choice but to climb into bed behind Chuuya and hold him through it all, whether he wants to or not.

"It will be okay," he murmurs, stroking Chuuya's head over and over,

even though he is not so sure anymore whether that is the truth. How much longer is this going to last? How much longer can Chuuya's body even take this amount of stress? How long did it take Verlaine to rid himself of this toxic fever?

Dazai probably should have brought Chuuya right back to the Port Mafia. There, at least, he would have had a professional team of doctors to ensure his comfort and health. He was selfish – he always is in one way or another – to steal Chuuya away. But he wanted time, just one or two days to explain everything and to talk before the Mafia would take over their lives once more. He didn't anticipate Chuuya's withdrawals to be this bad. He should have. A drug able to contain a singularity rivaling the power of a god cannot be anything less than pure poison.

Dazai's words aren't meant to comfort him but Chuuya, so he tells him again, over and over, hoping to reach him, where he is, buried deep within this uncontrollable fever. "You'll be okay. Just a little longer."

"I *can't*," Chuuya rasps through tears and sweat, shaking from head to toe against him. "I can't do this… I need to go back. I need to –"

"Shhh, you don't need that." Dazai wipes a cloth, wet with cold water, over Chuuya's forehead. "I swear to you, I will get you through this."

"Then take me with you."

Dazai's arm stills.

"Take me with you," Chuuya whispers deliriously and presses himself so tightly into Dazai, it's like he wants to climb inside of him. "We'll go together… just you and I. We'll be together again."

"You're not thinking straight."

But even in the midst of fever-heat, Chuuya shakes his head, clawing at his hair, his skin, his face until Dazai has to squeeze his fingers between his hands. "I don't want to do this anymore. I can't. Take me with you." The broken groan of pain he makes when Dazai tightens his arms around him tears his heart in two. "Take me with you. *Please*, I miss you so much. I miss you all the time."

"I'm here. You're okay. I'm… You'll be okay."

"You're not. You're dead."

“Not anymore,” Dazai says numbly. He has to because eventually, Chuuya will come back to himself and he will need to hear these words. It doesn’t matter how wrong Dazai’s mouth feels as he utters them.

Chuuya’s breath hiccups; his trembling continues to raze him down. “Take me with you.” Just like Dazai, that’s all he says. *Take me with you, take me with you, take me with you.* Over and over. An endless chant.

And for a few horrible hours, Dazai fears that Chuuya may get his wish.

***

It’s dawn, the sun starting its slow ascent outside this man-made hell, and Dazai is in the bathroom, washing his hands and fingers and the dirt stuck under his nails. He wishes he could do the same with his resilience, the thing that keeps people going even in the face of despair. Give it a hard scrub until it’s shiny and new.

Since that’s not possible, he settles on releasing all that stale air with a sigh before opening the door.

Chuuya has been unconscious for half a day, having exhausted himself after hours of begging. Dazai wonders what will come next. They have already gone through the entire spectrum of emotional torment. If more physical agony is next, he will have no choice but to find a hospital, after all. That, or the Port Mafia.

Chuuya’s still lying on his side, facing away from him. Dazai ended up handcuffing his wrists to each other to keep him more comfortable. He can’t wait to take them off altogether but until then, this will have to do.

Dazai takes a seat on the edge of the bed. Lifts his hand, and hesitates, before tentatively touching Chuuya’s arm.

Chuuya’s head snaps to him and his entire body goes stiff, shock writing itself into every line of his face.

“You’re awake,” Dazai says, unsure, and helps him sit up. “How are you feeling?”

Chuuya’s throat bobs a few times, and then, he croaks out a ragged, “Dazai?”

Time slows to a crawling halt. They've had a few of these moments already, moments in which Chuuya jerked awake, saw Dazai, and went utterly still with disbelief — but every single time, his delirious doubts overpowered him and he refused to believe what he saw. It's almost ironic that Dazai's doing the same thing right now, rejecting the hope that wells up inside of him, because it tastes so sweet, so temptingly sweet that it simply cannot be real.

But Chuuya is staring at him with wide, glassy eyes that mirror the hungry sparks crackling under Dazai's skin.

"Yes?" he breathes out.

"You're… you're really here?"

He chokes out a dizzying sound of happiness before nodding eagerly. "Yes," Dazai nods again and again, over and over, squeezing Chuuya's arms, "it's me. I'm real. Not a hallucination."

Chuuya's face twists, a mixture of incredulity and staggering relief, but the sob that breaks free from him before he falls into Dazai's arm is not one of pain, *not anymore*. "I woke up alone. I thought —" Dazai cups the back of his head; clutches Chuuya tighter when his voice cracks, overwhelmed by the storm of emotions that must be rolling over him. "I thought all of it had been a dream. I thought *you* had been a dream."

"Not a dream."

"Not a dream," Chuuya whispers like his mind still struggles to comprehend this fact. Then, eyes reddened and cheeks wet, he draws away to look at Dazai. Dazai looks right back.

They spent the last two days together but this…

This is the first time they are actually seeing each other — and god, how he has missed Chuuya. It's almost too much, this relief; it takes his breath away. He wants to say something but the emotions that swell inside his chest are too big to put into words.

Chuuya's mouth opens and closes a few times. Eventually, he speaks first though. "I love you."

It startles a laugh out of Dazai.

"I love you. I love you so much. I don't hate you." More tears well up

in Chuuya's eyes as his mouth wobbles. "I didn't get to say it back but I do. I *do*. I love you."

Dazai manages a weak, tight-lipped smile and weakly wipes at his cheek. "I know," he says once he finds his voice. "I know."

Chuuya sucks in another unsteady inhale before Dazai draws him back into his arms, feeling his cold, wet nose nuzzle his neck. "You're here. You're really here… I thought…"

Just as he was starting to calm down, he pulls back once more, and this time, he stares at Dazai with a bewildered confusion that makes his stomach twist. "But you were — I don't – " Struck speechless, Chuuya shakes his head. "*How*?"

Dazai had two days to come up with the perfect way to answer this question. Technically, even longer. And still, he comes up empty.

"Let's get you out of these first." He nods at the handcuffs around Chuuya's wrists, digging around in his pocket for the key. Chuuya lifts his hands without taking his gaze off him, watching Dazai with such reverent diligence as though fearing that Dazai will dissolve into dust the second he looks away. As soon as his wrists are freed, Chuuya raises them to Dazai's face, though they hover millimeters away.

"You can touch," Dazai promises, encircling Chuuya's fingers with his own and guiding them to his cheeks. "I'm not going to vanish."

Chuuya musters a shaky nod but it's not until several seconds pass without anything happening that he finally starts to relax, a dazed, somewhat boyish smile dancing across his features. "I don't understand…"

Dazai almost wishes he wouldn't have to.

But he came back to do better. He can't stomach wasting this chance on another lie.

He allows Chuuya one more moment of amazed astonishment. Then, Dazai summons a picture-perfect grin for him and leans back. "You're not going to like this at first, but once you calm down and really — I mean really think about it, you will come to realize that it's not that bad. I swear. It's quite okay, actually."

Chuuya's expression pales with foreboding. "Dazai," he says after swallowing loudly. "What is it?"

“Let me start at the beginning…”

***

THREE MONTHS AGO

The man wakes up with a gasp.

A dream, his half-conscious brain tells him. Whatever it was, it was a dream. Just a dream.

Yet when his eyes open, the darkness remains.

He swallows. Closes them again. Blackness. Opens them again. And nothing.

The first drop of panic trickles into his blood, but he forces it down. *Think*, he tells himself. Use your brain to find a solution rather than letting the fear of the unknown defeat you.

And so he does.

He sucks in a stale breath of air and blinks in the darkness before moving, shifting his body this way and that to make sure that it works. It does. Then, cautiously, he stretches out his hands and instantly bumps against something dull. Wood, by the sound and feeling of it. The attempt to lift his arms results in the same thing.

He is a wooden box roughly the size of his body.

No, Dazai Osamu is in a coffin.

That’s when the memories rush past him – the attack, the rooftop, the sickening sway of the world as he fell, and then —

A different universe. A hundred different ones. A hundred different Chuuyas, all of them familiar but none of them *his.* Natsume. Always telling him no. Natsume finally saying yes. Blackness. Then nothing. Then this. Waking up here. Trapped. The memories and the panic are too overwhelming to hold back this time. They rise inside of him like bile and Dazai has to clamp a hand over his mouth. He can’t get sick, not here, not now, not when he is sealed away in a coffin despite being very much alive.

Small, enclosed spaces have never been his favorite but this goes far beyond mere *dislike*. This resembles something more of a personal hell.

That thought makes Dazai solidify in place. What if it is?

There is no guarantee that Natsume told him the truth. He could have sent him anywhere, even to hell. Dazai can be fickle and creative when it comes to survival but maybe, just maybe, he should have accepted that not even he can escape the clutch of something as final and natural as death when he still had the chance. It comes for everybody. It is unstoppable.

He should be dead.

He is dead.

Only he, foolishly, did not anticipate death to feel so vivid, so horrific that not even life can compete.

With a breath of hysterical amusement, his head falls back, eyelids slipping shut. A bead of sweat rolls down his face. It doesn't matter whether he sees anyway. He is dead, dead, dead, and none of it matters.

His chest falls and rises for a few moments.

Maybe… maybe this is not so bad, after all. Perhaps he simply has to let it happen. Once he accepts the fact that he is dead, it will become easier, and he will be able to float away. Fall asleep. Right?

"Wrong," a voice suddenly says.

Dazai's eyes fly open, and despite knowing deep down inside that he is still stuck in a coffin, the image in front of him only becomes crisper. He is on the floor, arms stretched out, staring at a ceiling. His head lifts and he freezes.

"What happened to the promise you gave me?" Nakahara Chuuya asks.

Throat dry, he has to gulp to find his voice. "I'm dead. I…"

Is this another universe then?

No.

In what universe would a person be able to materialize in front of him out of nothing?

That means that this — that the image Dazai is staring at is not real.

Chuuya acts startlingly real though, daringly tilting his head. “You what?”

“I’m sorry,” he whispers, because what else is he supposed to tell this illusion?

“You’re sorry,” Chuuya repeats flatly, raising his brows. “That’s it? Shit, do you think I give a fuck? I don’t care if you’re sorry. I care about you doing something about it.”

Dazai’s brows furrow,. “What do you want me to do, Chuuya? I’m stuck here, hallucinating you. I must have failed to convince Natsume. I died. I’m dead.” He exhales a breath of wry depreciation. “I can’t snap my fingers and change that now. I’m not god.”

“You’re Dazai Osamu. You don’t need to be god to figure it out.”

He shakes his head. Slides a hand across his face. This is wrong. He accepted it. He accepts the fact that he is dead. So why is he seeing this? This isn’t peaceful *at all.* Perhaps it’s not supposed to be — if he is in hell.

“Oi, don’t ignore me. I’m speaking to you.”

“You’re my –” It’s funny. Even in death, saying the word boyfriend when it comes to Chuuya is strange. Especially in death. They were a lot of things, the two of them, and, undeniably, there was love between them, but boyfriend sounds so trivial. So normal. Dazai shakes his head. “Aren’t you supposed to comfort me or something like that?”

“You think death gives you an excuse to be coddled?” Chuuya shoots back.

“Well, a man can dream…”

Suddenly, a foot kicks him in the arm. Dazai yelps before shooting Chuuya a wounded scowl, rubbing the spot. “That hurt!”

“That’s the point. Get the fuck up.”

“I’m in a coffin,” Dazai snaps. “How am I supposed to get up?!”

“Think! Isn’t that supposed to be the thing that you’re good at?!”

“Stop yelling at me!”

“No!”

“Think!”

“I – I don’t know how to get out of this one! I don’t know what to do, okay?!”

“You do know! You always know!”

“Not this!”

“You’re Dazai Osamu –”

“You keep saying that like it means something!”

“It does! It means something!”

“Go ahead and tell me then!”

“No, you’re the one who has to figure it out because you’re the one stuck in a coffin.”

Sucking in a sharp breath of air, Dazai stares at his stubborn little husband, so demanding even in death. He supposes it is his own fault though. After all, it’s not really Chuuya. It’s Dazai’s mind playing tricks on him. It’s hell.

“Now wouldn’t that be convenient,” a new voice says. A voice that makes him flinch in surprise. A voice that belongs to a man who grabs Dazai by the neck and wrenches him down to the floor before he neatly steps around him, entering his vision and eclipsing everything else.

Dazai forces a breath out of his tight lungs. “Father.”

“Is that what I am now? A few years is all it took to forget all the lessons I’ve taught you?”

Right.

“Boss.”

That earns him a smile with the slightest hint of pride. Dazai hates that even after all this time, it tugs at him, that pride, bringing back the child that would have done anything to make his boss proud.

“That’s more like it, Osamu. Quite a mess that you’ve got yourself in,

hm?"

"It's not a mess," he says with a weak shrug. "I'm just dead."

"That look like death to you?" the boss asks, gesturing around. Dazai's gaze inevitably follows his hands, seeing the familiar surroundings of the office. When it still belonged to the man, that is. Less cluttered, more bright somehow.

"It looks like divine punishment for all my sins."

"So you've become religious."

"What is it," Dazai forces through clenched teeth, "that you want to say?"

The man's face drains of all mocking emotions and into a hard, dry expression. One that belongs to a pragmatic soldier. "I taught you better than to give up at the first sign of trouble. Do you think a soldier would just lie down in the middle of a battle?"

"Except I'm not a soldier and this isn't a battle. I'm *dead*." Dazai pauses to glare at him. "No amount of brute force and stubborn, idiotic persistence can make a living man out of a dead one."

The boss reacts just as enthusiastically as he would to a seven-year-old boy throwing a temper tantrum. Probably because that is exactly who he sees when he looks at Dazai. Ever the child.

"Okay," he says.

Dazai continues to stare up at him, heartbeat pulsing in his ears, waiting for the lesson.

It comes a second later when his father lifts his foot, then slams it across Dazai's face with all his might, hard enough to make his teeth rattle inside his mouth.

Gasping for air, Dazai brings a hand to his lips. He tastes blood.

"Does this feel like you're dead?"

Dazai spits out the cocktail of injury and pride before leveling a glower at him. "Considering you're here, yes, it very much feels like I'm in hell and –"

Slam.

“I have a lot of time, Osamu. I can go all day long.”

“I liked you… liked you better when you were just a *memory!*”

Slam.

Dazai is not sure how many more feet his face has met until his father fists a hand in his collar and yanks him up to look him in the eye. “Let’s try this again,” he says. “Is this what death feels like, Osamu?”

He opens his mouth to spit out his reply but it’s the vivid intensity of his pain that makes him stop. Just for a second. It would make perfect sense if he was in hell. He killed people. Hurt them. Manipulated them. He dragged someone down into the abyss of his well of misery just to be less alone. He was selfish and he did not care. He may have never been religious, but he isn’t above acknowledging that punishing him in death is the universe keeping score.

And yet.

Dazai has spent so much time fantasizing about death and never was it like this. Not because he never believed that he would suffer but because he thought that even an eternity of suffering would be more peaceful. These people are not real. He is speaking to himself. That means that a part of him is resisting still.

That is what doesn’t make sense.

He is dead. Why would he resist the one thing he has always dreamed of?

Dazai drags his gaze to his father’s expectant eyes and, with a bruised, raspy voice, he asks, “So what if it isn’t? What am I supposed to do about that?”

The boss lets go of him so suddenly that the entire world tilts. Dazai’s back hits not the floor of the office but the coffin; his eyelids flutter once, twice, and then his father seals the lid shut, locking him inside the well of darkness again.

“Hey,” his voice trembles despite his best efforts, hand lifting to slam his hand against the wood. “What are you doing? You were the one to tell me that I’m not dead. Hey!”

And…

“I’m teaching you a lesson.” Dazai’s chest falls with relief – even though it shouldn’t. It’s comforting not to be completely alone though even if it’s his father that is his sole companion. He should have listened to Chuuya. “What do you see?”

“Nothing,” he murmurs. “It’s dark. I see nothing.”

“What do you feel?”

Irritation spreads in his chest but at least it’s a distraction from the oppressive size of this thing. Forcing himself to take one calm breath after another, he slides his palms across the walls that surround him. “Wood. It’s a coffin.” He pauses to hear the next question but nothing comes. “Boss?”

“Do you want me to walk you through it step by step or what?”

“That’d be nice, yes,” he mutters, jaw tight.

“You’re not a child anymore, Osamu. Either you want this or you don’t but no half-assing. Use your brain.”

Lips pursed in thought, Dazai just considers the situation before coming to a very obvious conclusion: to push. Bracing his back against the floor, he starts to push against the coffin. Unless somebody locked the thing, it shouldn’t be too hard, right?

Wrong.

He pushes and nothing happens.

After a moment, he stops. It makes sense of course. Coffins are buried. Tons of earth and dirt are pressing down on it. Of course, he won’t be able to just open it and rise from the dead. But it’s not impossible either. He just has to… try.

He has to want it hard enough to try.

After he rolls up his sleeves, he places his hands back on the lid. Takes a deep breath. Pushes.

He pushes with every single muscle of strength that his body, dead or alive, possesses, hard enough to make him groan and feel like his face is about to explode from the strain. Then, just as he is about to give up, something gives.

He has the mind to clamp his mouth shut because a moment later, the

lid slides open and welcomes a mountain of earth inside. A different kind of darkness swallows him. This one is moist and dirty. But it is also solid. Dazai pushes up with his hands, trying to sit up against this overwhelming tide of dirt. He feels it enter his nose, slip past his lips as he fights not to breathe even though his lungs are screaming for air. His fingers try to find some kind of surface, something to latch onto, but all they find is more earth, supple and malleable, burying him deeper and deeper.

If he wasn't dead already, he is going to do so now.

At least, before, it was somewhat dignified. This…

This is pure torture.

As more and more earth fills him, he feels something hot and wet slide down his face. Tears.

This is it.

This is –

"Just a little more." Chuuya. That's Chuuya's voice, muffled, distant, like he is somewhere far away but still somehow close enough. "You're almost there."

Just a little more, huh?

He supposes he can try. Just this once.

Gathering one last gulp of courage, he extends one arm and then the other, blindly searching for something, anything. Miraculously, his fingers find it — a solid patch of earth. Determined, he digs his fingers into the soil and pulls, relentlessly, until he emerges from the depths of hell, gasping for breath, but triumphant. Dirt clouds his visions, sticking to every single surface of his body, but the air guides him higher and higher before he finally feels enough solid ground to pull himself up completely and collapse.

Heart thundering, body heavy, he lies there, barely able to breathe with all the filth in his lungs but sucking on the sweet air like an addict.

Something touches his forehead. A hand. Fingers. They brush his dirtied bangs out of his face. "You made it," Chuuya tells him, the smile audible in his voice. "I'm proud of you."

Dazai can only wheeze out a laugh, exhausted and giddy from the rush of survival. He wants to open his eyes and look at Chuuya, apologize, tell him that he is not going to break any promise of his ever again. He should do that. The thought slides down his spine slowly, like warm wine. He should, but right now he is simply too heavy and the ground too soft. The exhaustion is too tempting.

Time flows past him. Earth continues to spin around the sun, round and round, a carousel that never stops.

It's the rustle of wind that wakes him. Or the terrible taste in his mouth, like something has died in it. Or maybe it's the distant sound of a bird screaming somewhere overhead. But it takes Dazai a few tries to pry his eyes open. The first thing that he sees is the sky: blue and gigantic and spread over everything.

A giddy laugh of relief bubbles up inside of him.

Sky. Not blackness. He is alive.

He never thought he would be so happy to hear that. He is alive.

Then his gaze slides to the side and his laughter stops. The sky isn't the only thing spread over everything. Down here, it's sand.

Lots and lots of sand… as far as the eye can see. Only sand.

Dazai takes a moment to process that.

He is in the desert.

Then the wrongness of this fact pulls him into a sitting position.

How is he in the desert when, just a moment ago, he was still buried in the ground? He turns around to look for the hole that he crawled out of but all he finds is more sand. Just sand. No coffin. No hole. No nothing. Sand.

His stomach twists.

"Looking rough there, buddy."

Dazai's head snaps around but the person that he sees standing in front of him only makes his frown deeper. "Albatross?"

"Duh," Albatross says, planting one hand on his hip as he chews mint with the other. "I'm going to pretend you're just as happy to see me as

you were to see the others."

Dazai blinks.

That he is just…

Then he looks at Albatross. "If you're here, that means I'm still not alive." Not alive, yet he isn't truly dead either. "Right?"

His friend makes a face. "Afraid so. Really sucks, huh?"

That is one way to put it. Dazai takes another look at his surroundings before lifting his eyes back to the man. "So. Are you not going to give me any advice? Tell me to fight?"

"Oh, I'm just here to keep you company. Figured you'd get lonely."

"Great," Dazai mutters, pushing himself to his feet. He wobbles like a baby deer when he stands for the first time since…

Well, since he died. He glances down to make sure there is nothing broken down there. There isn't. He doesn't carry the injuries of a man who jumped down from the rooftop of a building with 33 stories. Neither does he carry the clothes of somebody who fought his way out of a coffin. No dirt, no earth, no nothing.

His gaze slides to Albatross who falls into step beside him, humming cheerfully under his breath. "Can you tell me anything?"

"Mhh, depends."

"Am I still dead?"

Albatross waggles his brows. "Do you feel dead?"

"Feels like I'm stuck in a vicious cycle of punishment," he mutters and directs his attention back ahead of him, the nothingness, contemplating what to do now. It must be some kind of mind thing. But if it isn't hell, what is it?

Look at the facts, a voice whispers in the back of his head – one, that for once, does not belong to his imaginary companion but to himself. So he pauses.

"We're in a desert," he murmurs, eyes narrowed. "Supposing it's a real place and not made up, is it in Japan or somewhere outside of it." A side glance at Albatross only reveals boyish jollity but no answers.

Damn his own head. “If it’s the former, it’s not a desert but…” He squints for a long moment before it comes to him. “Sand dunes! The Tottori Sand Dunes.”

“Bingo!” Albatross cries.

Dazai frowns. “So you couldn’t tell me but you can confirm it? How is that logical?”

“I told you, man. I’m just here to provide the entertainment.”

“Right. So… Tottori.”

It’s not too far away from Yokohama, especially with a vehicle, but he will have to get out of the dunes first – and he still doesn’t know how real all of this is. Maybe he will wake up to another hyper-vivid hallucination in ten minutes.

He slides his hands into the pockets of his coat – and frowns. Something cool touches his skin.

A compass, Dazai realizes a moment later. Not just some compass. It’s *the* compass. The one that is supposed to lead him to Chuuya no matter where he is.

“You never gifted me anything like that,” Albatross complains somewhere behind him.

Sliding his fingers over the smooth brass, Dazai exhales a breath of wry amazement. Of course the compass is here. There is a reason why it cost him a fortune and it’s not that it just looks pretty.

He slides it open and watches the counter show him the direction that he needs to follow.

“Oi! Where are we going?”

“Home,” Dazai says, heart pounding at the mere thought of it. “We’re going home.”

***

“Are you sure we’re heading in the right direction?”

“Yes,” Dazai replies through clenched teeth despite the way his gaze treacherously slides toward the compass to ask the same question. The pointer hasn’t changed since they started this path.

“We’ve been walking for quite a while,” Albatross points out by his side. “I’m kind of tired. My feet hurt.”

So do Dazai’s. He can’t tell how much time has passed and he doesn’t know whether that is a good sign or whether it should scare him. All he knows is that every bone in his body aches from the non-stop walking, his throat is paper-dry and craving water, his stomach has a hole in it, and the rays of hope have been replaced by a shadow of doubt. Still, he does not stop. Determined to outlast his reservations. What else is he supposed to do?

“Leave then.”

“I can’t.”

“Then –” Dazai shakes his head “— conjure up a car or a plane or *something*. This isn’t real, so why are we bound to the metaphysical laws of the actual word?”

“Hey, you’re the one who is stuck here. You do it.”

Blowing out a breath, Dazai turns his gaze forward and frowns at the sky. Yet no matter how hard he tries to imagine a chopper, the desert remains diabolically empty. No vehicles, no helicopters, and certainly no saviors to rescue him.

“This is useless,” he mutters, rubbing a hand across his dry lips.

“Do you want to hear a joke?”

“No.”

“Knock, knock.”

It must be the dehydration that makes him sigh and say, “Who’s there?”

“Boo!”

“… Boo who?”

“Don’t cry, it’s just a joke!”

Dazai forces his feet to drag on for another indefinite amount of time before a nauseating wave of dizziness ultimately topples him over. His vision swims. Staggering, he stumbles to his hands and knees, then sits up and rests his forehead in one arm, trying to breathe through the

sickness that eats away at his organs.

“I’m dead,” he whispers. “Shouldn’t I be…” Another wave of nausea makes him pause, all the blood draining from his skin – or so it feels. “Shouldn’t I be past all this?”

But when he lifts his eyes, Albatross isn’t there.

He was of no use whatsoever to Dazai throughout this entire journey, but Dazai feels his heart sink at the realization that he is alone – completely and utterly alone in this endless desert filled with nothing but sand and misery.

As in life, so in death.

Alone.

Closing his eyes, he almost expects to hear Chuuya’s voice again, saying something like ‘but you weren’t really alone, were you? You had me. I was there. You forced me to be there and then you forced me to live without you.’

But that voice never comes.

There is nothing. Not the wind, not even the distant cry of an animal, just –

Nothing.

When Dazai’s eyelids slip open, he realizes that something has changed though.

The light has left as well. Night has fallen.

He blinks a few times, sniffing, before glancing at the compass. Still the same.

What now?

It should be an easy question to answer: now you get up and you walk until you reach your destination.

But the mere thought of somehow getting to his feet, when all he wants is to lie down and let his exhaustion and misery swallow him, towers like an impregnable mountain ahead of him. He can’t do it. A stubborn little part of him wants to, but he is not sure he has that kind of resilience. He has always been rather sensitive. His soul used to

bruise like the soft skin of a fruit. Until he took that part of himself and sliced it into sharp pieces. No one would be able to hurt him if they cut themselves on him.

Life… nature doesn't care about sharpness though. It just is.

"I'm sorry," he murmurs to no one in particular, curling up on the ground with his cheek resting on his hand. "I'm just so…" He yawns. Swallows dry air. Eyelids fluttering shut. "… very tired."

Just a nap.

Maybe he will feel better afterward.

Maybe…

Just maybe…

***

"Get up."

What is that? It must be a dream he is having.

"Get up."

"Hm?"

Suddenly, something, someone drags Dazai out of his feverish slumber and to his stumbling feet. The hands that grip him are hard but the eyes that glower at him are even harder. Yet the sight of them makes Dazai's eyes burn with this strange ache in his skull.

"You came."

"Of course I came," Chuuya spits, looking at him like Dazai is the single most awful person in the universe. "Do you seriously expect me to let you die here, lying on the ground like a pathetic little man?"

"Well… yeah… you left."

"No, *you* left. I never went anywhere."

"I mean –"

"I know what you mean. Just get up already."

Chuuya doesn't leave him any time to think. He starts to pull Dazai after him and across the sand with a pace that outmatches his physical capabilities and strength, yet every time he staggers or slows down, Chuuya's fingers tighten around him, refusing to let him fall behind.

This isn't real, Dazai thinks somewhere in the back of his head. This isn't really happening.

It doesn't stop him though.

Real or not, he is moving, taking one step at a time toward a distant but inevitable future.

He stumbles and he walks and he strides and he runs and…

He falls.

"Get up," Chuuya says without a hint of mercy in his voice.

Clutching the ground for support, Dazai gasps for breath. His lungs have shriveled up into two paper-dry towels. His legs are… He can't even feel them anymore. He is not sure they are still attached to his body. Not sure whether he is conscious or whether he is stuck in a terribly cruel dream.

"I said get up."

"I can't," he rasps, shoulders shaking from exertion. His breath comes out as a shuddering wheeze. "How do you…" He lifts his eyes to Chuuya – his strong, unshakable, and resilient Chuuya. "How do you do that?"

Chuuya stares back at him unflinchingly. "Do what?"

"Just keep going no matter… no matter what." Dazai gestures helplessly at him. "I'm not like you, Chuuya. I don't even want to live… I just…"

Chuuya slowly sinks into a squat in front of him. "So why are you even here?"

A breathless, wild laugh escapes from him. "You're asking me this?"

"Yes."

"I don't know! I don't know, okay? I woke up here… I…" He doesn't know – that is the truth. But that doesn't mean he has no suspicions.

He always has theories. They come as naturally to him as breathing. However, actually acknowledging them is a different matter entirely. "I think…" His chest falls and rises heavily. "A part of me is fighting to stay alive…"

"So you do want it," Chuuya concludes wryly.

Dazai's jaw flexes before he quietly says, "I made you a promise."

"Fuck the promise."

"Huh?"

Chuuya grasps his cheek, holding his eyes. "Fuck the promise, Dazai. This isn't about me or anyone else – this is about you and what you want. You of all people should know that living for others will never be enough. It has to come from you." His fingers slide lower, to his heart. "From here. Do you want it or not?"

"That's a pretty difficult question, chibi…"

"Is it really? You could have given up a hundred times already but you didn't."

"Because you told me not to," Dazai retorts, frowning.

"Except I'm not really here, am I?" Chuuya tilts his head. His smile is… not condescending, just amused. "What's more likely: me, who isn't dead but alive, dragging you to your feet in death, or you hallucinating someone you associate with resilience and survival to make yourself fight?"

The answer is in the question itself, but Dazai has trouble believing that this is… that he has been the one to keep himself going all this time. Why in the world would he do such a dreadful thing?

"You want to live," Chuuya tells him with a nod. "Maybe it's only a part of you, so tiny that it's barely there but it *is*. You want to know what it's like to wake up and feel good. You want to know what else is out there. You want me, you want us, and all the possibilities that are out there for us. You want a life. You want a chance to at least try."

Dazai's fingers clench in the sand. His whole body does. "Only a fool would dream of such a naïve thing as living," he whispers. Hope is nothing but a parasite that eats away at your flesh but keeps you wretchedly alive at the same time.

Chuuya raises his brows. “What’s so wrong with being a fool, huh?”

“Everything,” is the automatic answer. “Better not to hope at all…”

“And end up here, alone and miserable, right?”

“Hoping is what got me here.”

“No, Dazai. Jumping off a roof when you could have made a thousand different other choices was what got you here.”

Dazai’s lips press shut. He isn’t wrong, of course. He had choices. He had possibilities. They were flimsy and scarce but they were there. His shoulders sag; so does his head. “I was tired,” he murmurs. “Is that so wrong?”

Chuuya brushes his fingers through his hair; his touch is softer than his voice. “No, it is not.”

“But?”

There is always a but.

“You already know. I don’t need to say it.”

“Just say it,” Dazai demands. Begs.

The ice in Chuuya’s eyes freezes him to his core. “You could have chosen to rest. You still have that chance. Every moment that you spend here, clinging to this dimension, you are making a choice. It’s not wrong to want that peace. We just both know that you don’t want it hard enough. Not really. You want something else.”

“But I’m trying. I am. I just… what else do you want me to do?” Dazai’s breath rattles in his lungs. “How long am I supposed to go on? I don’t – I can’t spend the rest of my afterlife trekking through this fucking desert.”

When he meets Chuuya’s eyes again, the man wears a playful smile, a stark contrast to the deep ache in Dazai’s chest. “Who said you have to walk? Just crawl.”

Crawl?

Every nerve in his body strains against this idea. Dazai Osamu does not crawl. Maybe for Chuuya, he does. He did, once upon a time when he was still alive. But to crawl just to live – the thing that he detests

most of all? It's humiliating.

Ironically enough, it is also necessary.

"I despise you, have I ever told you that?" Dazai mutters under his breath, taking the first humiliating step of a million other ones. The cold silence makes him glance to the side. Chuuya is already gone. His head sinks between his shoulders but he doesn't stop moving. He crawls.

***

Time loses all meaning when you are on your hands and knees, dragging yourself toward a future that is as bright and as distant as the sun in the sky. So does everything else. His grief. His longing. His bottomless homesickness for a home he has never even entered. His shame, his guilt, anger, grief, fear, attached to millions of tiny memories – the things that distinguish him from an animal, are the first to evaporate. Leaving him like toxic gas. Freeing him. All that remains are his physiological sensations. Hunger; thirst; exhaustion; the scrape of aggressive sand against his paper-dry skin until piece by piece the desert begins to strip away even them. The last thing he feels is a ray of sun skipping down his face. His eyes slip shut. Warmth. Then the moon and the cold, and then nothing.

Nothing remains. Neither happiness nor unhappiness.

Everything passes.

And he is clean, at last.

***

The man wakes up slowly, comfortably, blinking one, two, three times before fully slipping into consciousness. Yawning, he stretches his arms above his head. The last shreds of his terribly vivid dream are already evaporating.

"Morning," an awfully familiar voice suddenly says above him. "Sleep well?"

That makes Dazai jerk up for good. He rubs his hands over his eyes to make sure he isn't seeing things. "Odasaku?"

Oda Sakunosuke stands above him with a cup of coffee. Dazai knows he is a friend but cannot explain why. Surrounding him are books.

Lots of them, filling every corner of this peculiar, little place. The picture, too, is a whisper of familiarity, haunting the edges of his mind. Dazai glances down. He is sitting on the floor but he could have sworn it was a bed just a moment ago.

Then again…

“This isn’t real, right?”

Oda nods, then gestures to the side. “I’m here to accompany you.”

“Accompany me where?” He doesn’t wait for a reply though. He rises to his feet, walks to the door that Oda had pointed toward, and takes a look. What lies outside is strange, to say the least.

Rows and rows of grapevines, stretching as far as the eye can see. The golden rays of a setting sun. People tending to the vines, walking around in denim overalls and straw hats. Dazai recognizes the faces of his siblings. He shouldn’t be able to see them so far away in the distance but he does. He just knows who they are. Knows the other people that begin to fill his vision as well. Gin, strolling across the grass and drinking from a juice box. Albatross… maneuvering a tractor. A black cat and next to her, at last, a man with obnoxiously ginger hair, tied into a loose ponytail, facing away from Dazai.

“I see,” he says. It’s harder to tear his gaze away from the picture than he expected. “You’re here to accompany me to the other side. This is some kind of afterlife, correct?”

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?”

That’s when another voice says, “It’s just France, for fuck’s sake.”

Dazai whirls around, lips parting around a confused noise. He was sure he saw Chuuya a second ago outside but…

Here he is, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, just as miffed as the last time Dazai saw him looming above him and telling him to just crawl. The brutal details of the memory make Dazai’s head jolt back. Chuuya pushes away from the wall and jerks his chin toward Dazai. “The real thing’s a thousand times prettier. We were there, remember?”

Dazai frowns. They were? But a picture flashes in front of his mind, one showing Chuuya yelling at him. And another. Chuuya asleep in the bed next to him. Dazai watching him, thinking about asking him

to run away and start fresh. To just live. Chuuya on a field in the middle of nowhere, activating corruption over and over, even when blood started running out of his nose. Chuuya panting against his mouth, making him a promise and demanding one in return. Three years.

Wincing, Dazai touches his head. How could he have forgotten something so significant?

Suddenly fingers touch his hand. Clutch it. Dazai opens his eyes to see Chuuya standing in front of him, staring at him so gravely it's like he wants to reach inside his soul. "There's more of that, you know. So much more than this tiny taste of a life that you could have had."

"I'm assuming you are not here to accompany me to the other side, huh?"

Chuuya shakes his head. Squeezes him. "I'm here to drag you back."

So it all comes down to a choice. But isn't he dead? Isn't that why he is here?

As if reading his mind, Oda infiltrates his sight once more. He probably is reading his mind because he *is* his mind. His subconscious. "It's not as easy just going back. You're right, you died. Your body is dead."

"It's not as simple as just fucking off into the afterlife either," Chuuya snaps at Oda before fixing Dazai with a stare. "Yes, you're dead but what does that mean in a world like ours? You've seen that nothing is ever as black and white as it seems. Fuck, you've *talked* to me about it."

"I have?"

"Yes, so *think*." Chuuya pushes him in the chest. "Think, Osamu. Think!"

Dazai does. He thinks. He squeezes his eyes shut. But it's like trying to catch shadows dancing at the periphery, always just out of focus. He opens his mouth only to close it again.

"I said think," Chuuya urges him and his grip around Dazai's wrist grows so tight that he grimaces. The sting triggers something.

"Right now, you mean. You are the boss right now because you've suddenly

decided to care. Meanwhile, a week ago, you were asking me to run away with you and leave everyone behind like it was nothing."

Dazai refuses to acknowledge his arguments and tries to brush past him..

"You said –" Chuuya grabs Dazai's wrist, pushing him back again. "— that you would give me three years – three years that you didn't want, so where are they?"

Dazai purposefully removes Chuuya's white-knuckled fingers from him before mustering him with a scrutinizing stare. "You're not ready."

Dazai gulps. He remembers that fight. Remembers talking to… Oda. Remembers coming home to Chuuya, telling him the truth, sinking to his knees only to be interrupted by –

Kafka sparks another memory.

"So, imagine the infinite number of universes is this book. Each page represents one universe. Following?"

Frowning, Chuuya nods.

"Technically, there is no way to cross over, but. See this?" Dazai traces the binding of the book with his index finger. "This is the point that connects every universe. It's always the same no matter which universe you're in… at least, so I think. I also suspect that it's the place where the veil between our and other universes is the thinnest, so sometimes, things slip through."

"That's a very speculative theory," Chuuya tells him, not bothering to mask his skepticism.

"I know." Dazai offers him a smile. "That's why I became the boss, not a scientist."

Chuuya stares at him, at his mouth, for a long moment before he blinks and clears his throat. "So, Kafka is from another universe where dragons exist?"

"It's possible, yes."

"And so are the ghosts?"

"Yes."

"But why now? The ghosts, I mean. If the veil has always existed, why would ghosts appear all of a sudden and not before that?" Before Chuuya

receives an answer, he says, "Let me guess. You have another theory."

Dazai barks out a laugh, earning them several curious glances from his people that they both ignore. "That's because the more people know about the Book, the flimsier this universe becomes. I believe it affects the veil as well."

The last word of this memory bleeds into another.

Dazai slides his hands into the pocket of his coat with a sigh and pauses. He grasps something round. Something cold. Blinking, he lifts the object to his eyes.

His brows furrow.

The compass?

It doesn't make any sense. Dazai's mind somehow crossed universes but his body didn't, so his belongings should not have either. Then again, the compass is not just any item. It's special. Dazai paid a hefty sum to acquire it at the auction and abilities do not always follow any rules of logic.

It doesn't have any cardinal directions. Just a needle that points toward its counterpart. The ring.

Following it, he steps out of the door and into the desert.

The needle does an 180.

Dazai spins back around but there is only the house. Of course. The compass is directing him toward Chuuya, who is in another universe, and this house — it's the closest place to that other universe.

"— can't just bully him into going back."

"Watch me. Osamu, do you remem –"

"The veil," Dazai gasps, panting from the onslaught of memories and all the disturbingly strong sensations that follow them. His head feels so hot he fears it will explode. "You want me to use the veil to go back, don't you?"

Chuuya's eager, borderline desperate nod, makes Dazai grow even dizzier with excitement. "Yes. Good. Keep going."

Dazai looks around to find another clue that could point him toward his destination only to realize that he is standing inside of it. This

place – it's the house in the desert. It's *always* the house in the desert in the end. This is the veil. The point that connects all the different universes.

Slowly and without letting go of Chuuya, he turns back to the door. "Is this it?"

"See for yourself," Chuuya says, gently nudging him forward.

Dazai lifts his hand to the doorknob.

"It won't be the same," Oda warns quietly. His eyes aren't angry or desperate as Chuuya's, not even disappointed. He just seems sad, as though he understands but also pities him. "*You* won't be the same. Cheating death has a price."

Dazai shrugs helplessly. "It's not like I can't die again if it's that terrible, right?"

Oda doesn't answer this time.

Dazai finds Chuuya's eyes and raises his brows, exhaling a nervous chuckle. *"Right?"*

"Nothing in this world's permanent. You know that."

It's not as explicit a confirmation as he hoped it to be but it's good enough. Nothing is permanent, so Dazai won't be either — in whatever form he comes back. "I'm sorry, Odasaku. I know you only want to protect me but... I'm not ready yet."

Oda sighs. But he nods. He nods. That's a good thing. "Then I'll see you when you are."

Turning to the door, Dazai squeezes Chuuya's hand in his. "Are you accompanying me back to life?"

"I'm not real," Chuuya whispers, so close to his back and yet worlds away.

Dazai's heart sinks even though he has known this all along. "So stay anyway. What's the difference?"

"The difference is that this world operates differently than the one you're returning to."

Dazai releases his disappointment with a sigh, steals one more

comforting touch of Chuuya's fingers and then he lets him go. Lets all of this — death, hell, afterlife — go. The desert greets him once more only that this time it feels shockingly real. Not like a place made out of plastic but a world made out of dirt, of sand, and flesh.

It feels like home.

He steps out –

And the ground slides out from beneath him. It's like falling, where the sky becomes the ground and the ground becomes the sky — everything flips around, turned on its head. The fabric of the universes swallows him entirely, devouring him, and once he can no longer distinguish thoughts from sensations, it spits him out.

***

Birds roam above him, screaming a song, screaming so loudly that he jerks awake.

Except the birds have hands and feet and their mouths move when they sing. Because the birds are not birds but they are humans. Because there are humans. A mere couple of meters away. Humans.

Dazai sits up, wide-eyed and short of breath. He scans his surroundings. Here is what he sees: the asphalt of a road, stretching into different directions, burnished grass, a building with a peculiar red roof, and *people*, gathered in a circle, talking — in Japanese, no less. A kid in a green shirt and mismatched socks eats fried peanuts out of a package.

He watches them for so long that they start to walk away. That is when Dazai should have realized. He is too distracted though, by the startling amount of agony in his body when he jumps to his feet and stumbles to a shocked halt, meaning that there is no agony at all. He feels good. Great even. Better than ever.

Dazai stares down at himself, looking for any visible changes, but the slam of the car door startles him into a jog again. "Hey," he calls, trying to catch the attention of the middle-aged woman that stubs her cigarette out with her foot, clearly disinterested in protecting the planet. "Hey! Hello! Pardon me!"

It's like speaking to a cat. No reaction whatsoever.

"I just want to know where I am! That's all – well, and maybe ask for

a ride but…" His speech trails off as the lady gets inside the car without sparing him a single glance. How rude.

Dazai's lips flatten; his irritation is easy enough to brush off but his wish to go home is the weed growing in the cracks of the sidewalk; annoying, unwelcome and so, so stubborn. Planting himself in front of the car, he places his palms on the hood and looks into the driver's cold, dismissive eyes. "I said," he repeats, emphasizing each syllable with an empty-eyed smile, "tell me where we are."

The strangest thing happens then.

The car comes alive with a ghoulish purr and it drives past Dazai. No, that's not quite right. It drives *through* him. There is no impact. No sudden screech of the tires as someone steps on the brakes. Not a wick of physical pain where there should be as steel meets flesh. There is nothing at all.

The car simply drives through him like Dazai is nothing and vanishes around the corner.

Dazai gazes down at himself for an eternity before he allows his bobbing throat to make a sad, pitiful sound. "Oh."

END OF PART IV

Chapter End Notes

TWs: a scene that depicts someone having a seizure, mentions of a suicide attempt, generally quite a lot of hallucinations and suicidal behavior, drug withdrawals, a scene where someone is buried alive/conscious… please tell me if I missed something

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Okay, I promise NOW I'm done torturing you. (Please don't hate me. I'm very sensitive….)

Chapter 47: Repercussions

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

PART V: DORMANCY

“Say something.”

Chuuya rubs a hand over his face, stifling a pained wince as the back of his skull throbs aggressively. “I don’t…” His mouth presses into a tight line. “I don’t understand. You’re still dead?” he asks, desperately hoping that he is monumentally wrong. “That what you’re telling me?”

But Dazai’s eyes only soften. “Sort of.”

Chuuya makes a sound like a laugh, yet the humor gets stuck in his throat. “But you’re here. I can see you. I can *touch* you.” He reaches for Dazai’s hands, grasps them tightly in his, and Dazai lets him. The nervous shadow of defeat doesn’t wane, though.

“It’s real. I’m real. Others can see me too. It’s just that I’m…” He squeezes Chuuya’s palm. “I’m not exactly alive either. I’m somewhere in between.”

“You’re a ghost.”

That’s what being something in between dead and alive means, doesn’t it? That’s what they know is possible. Chuuya has seen ghosts before. He fought them. And now…

Dazai nods.

“But that car,” Chuuya murmurs dazedly. Somewhere inside his head, something flatlines, but he strains against the growing silence, desperately grasping for irrelevant details, trying to delay the impact of the revelation for just one more second. “You said the car drove through you.”

“It took me a while to learn how to become —“ Dazai gestures weakly “— you know, solid.” Then he twists his mouth into an exaggerated grimace. “It’s not as easy as all those ghost stories make it out to be, I can tell you that.”

Another thread breaks.

“How long?” Chuuya whispers through clenched teeth. “Dazai, how long have you been here? The entire time?”

Dazai’s throat bobs before he says, “No. No, I don’t think so.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“I was confused. I barely remembered who I was. I was just drifting.” Shifting Dazai reaches inside his vest and produces a compass. Chuuya remembers it. It’s the other end of the ring around his fingers. “This little thing helped me find my way home and eventually I started to remember everything. You.”

“You found your way home,” he echoes, a question and a realization.

Dazai’s eyes track up to meet his. The abyss of guilt Chuuya sees there confirms his suspicion.

A sudden, ferocious restlessness pushes him to his feet. He paces through the room. “I thought I was hallucinating. Thought I was going crazy, seeing things that weren’t real but —“ He stops to pin Dazai with a wide-eyed stare. “That was you, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” Dazai answers softly.

“You were there. With me.”

“For a while, yes.”

A loaded beat of silence passes. Then Chuuya detonates. “And you couldn’t have fucking told me?!”

“I tried to!”

“Not hard enough! I thought you were dead! Dazai, I thought you were —“

“I tried to, okay? I did!” Dazai cuts in, standing up to stare down at him. “But you didn’t believe in what you saw. You didn’t want to believe — and this whole thing? It’s about belief.”

Chuuya clenches his jaw so tightly he feels like his teeth are about to track. It doesn’t deter Dazai from cupping his cheek like it’s the most delicate object in the world.

“You didn’t want to believe because believing meant having hope and you couldn’t let yourself have hope. I get it, Chuuya. Trust me. But I tried to tell you. I did.”

“I don’t fucking *understand*,” Chuuya whispers, words snagging in his throat. There are screws beneath his rib cage and they tighten with each rotten breath he inhales. This doesn’t make sense. None of it. Dazai being dead, yet being here. Dazai having been there the entire time. Dazai having watched him. Dazai being a *ghost.* It doesn’t make sense. It’s wrong.

“The more someone believes in me, the stronger I become in this world.” Chuuya can follow the logic of this explanation. His mind simply cannot grasp how it applies to Dazai. His Dazai. “You refused to believe what you saw, so I couldn’t tell you. I had to find someone else and —“ Dazai shakes his head, dismissing himself with a soft click of his tongue. “That took some time, and when I finally figured it out, you were already gone.”

“I’m sorry.” Aimlessly tugging at the collar of his shirt, suddenly too tight, too suffocating, too much, Chuuya takes a step back. Then another. “I should have… I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.”

“It is,” he protests weakly and sinks to his feet, pressing the balls of his palms to his temple. Oh god, Dazai’s a ghost. A fucking ghost. That can’t be right. It can’t be. “I didn’t protect you. It was my job to protect you and now you’re *dead*.”

Dazai’s shadow falls over him. And when Chuuya’s gaze darts to him, his heart breaks in half all over again. Dazai is tilting his head to the side like a curious black bird, his brows furrowed. He looks *confused*.

“But I’m still here. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

Chuuya chokes out a wild noise of alarm. “No, no, no, not like this.”

He doesn’t know *how* to possibly articulate the suffocating pressure that ripples through him in relentless waves. He feels like screaming. Or Crying. Or Both. Feels like he could shout until his face turns blue and still, it wouldn’t be enough.

“Not like this,” he repeats, barely able to speak around the pressure around his throat. “You don’t deserve to be stuck in this world as a ghost, Dazai. That’s… that’s *cruel*.”

Dazai sinks to his eye level until he is able to catch Chuuya's gaze and hold it, offering him a smile; it's supposed to be reassuring but all it does is fill him with crippling, bottomless grief. "I told you. It's not that bad."

Chuuya's head jerks back. "Not that bad? Look at me and tell me this doesn't go against every single one of your instincts. I mean — god, you wanted out of the Mafia because it made you feel dead inside! How is this not worse?!" He hastily wipes away the angry tears that well up, blurring his vision. "Can you even die like this?"

Dazai has the audacity to snort at that. "I come back from the dead and the first thing you worry about is whether I can die? Chuuya sure has a way of expressing his undying love for me."

Chuuya hates the uncontrolled laugh that it startles out of him. The joke is quick to fester though, leaving the taste of decay in his mouth.

"When I left to kill Dostoevsky," he says after a moment, lowering his gaze to his hands, "I didn't intend to come back." He stops to rearrange the words crowding his head but no matter which way he turns them, they continue to sound all wrong. "I wanted to kill him and then use corruption." He wanted this exhausting cycle of violence and death to end. He wanted a goddamn minute of peace. "I did use it. Or I was about to. Little did I know that the people that were sent there to capture me were armed with that fucking drug."

His eyes find Dazai. "The one thing I still had left was the choice to go out the way I wanted to. And they took that away. I don't want the same for you." Another tear rolls down his face. Sniffing, Chuuya swipes at it. "I know I asked you for the opposite back then but I get it now, Dazai. I do. I don't want you to feel like a lab rat that doesn't even have the right to die."

Dazai's expression softens. Chuuya has to look away, unable to stand his understanding. Fuck. "But I'm not a lab rat."

"Aren't you?"

"No. No, I'm not." Dazai takes his fingers into his hands, cradling them with a placid half-smile. "I could have let go. But I didn't. I chose not to. I'm here because I want to be, not because you've chained me to this life."

"But it's not a life anymore. That's just it."

“Will you stop making me feel worse about this than I actually am?”

Chuuya breathes out an apologetic noise. “Sorry.”

Dazai’s smile is solid, just like his hands. “I can die. This isn’t a lifelong prison sentence.”

Chuuya swallows, uncertain. “Yeah?”

Dazai makes a face. “Well, I didn’t get an instruction manual, but I suspect burning my corpse would do the trick. Or… I could let go.” When Chuuya’s brows knit in confusion, Dazai purses his lips. “I’ve had unfinished business and couldn’t entirely let go of this life. That’s why I’m still here. I believe that once I fulfill what I came for, I will, sort of, fade away like I was originally supposed to.”

Chuuya’s whole body clenches at the thought of Dazai fading away again. It contradicts everything he’s said in the past five minutes but he can’t possibly rationalize something as baffling as this. He doesn’t want to bind Dazai to this world by force but of fucking course he doesn’t want to lose him either. He just got him back.

“So what, one day you’ll simply disappear?”

“I guess,” Dazai shrugs with a shrug — and then he winks at him, the damn bastard. “Don’t worry, I’ll let you die first this time. “

It’s the most morbid thing Chuuya has ever heard, but it’s more profound than any vow of marriage.

“You fucking idiot.” His smile, as he brings his fingers to Dazai’s face, is overcome with awe though. “I hate you. So much.”

Dazai’s chuckle is the most mesmerizing sound Chuuya has heard in his life. Dazai leans his forehead against his and he can barely contain the tide of feelings, rising and crashing inside his skin, threatening to spill over. “I know.”

It’s at this precise moment, it begins to sink in, wholly sink in, that Dazai is back. From the second Chuuya saw Dazai's face in the elevator to the moment he woke up in this room, wrists cuffed together and alone, and even up until this minute, everything within him has been resisting believing, the fear of being stuck in another delirious fever dream making the thought unbearable.

But feeling Dazai’s skin press against his own, tracing the slope of his

cheekbones down to chin, then to the dip below his mouth and the softness of his lips, Chuuya would have to be on one hell of a drug to hallucinate something this vividly. And if that's the case – if he's still trapped in a laboratory and this is all just a dream that his mind conjured up — maybe that wouldn't be such a terrible outcome.

Not when Chuuya is able to grasp Dazai's neck and brush their mouths together, his heart battering so viciously against his chest it's like it wants to eat Dazai up and keep him safely tucked away. Then they cross that final breath of distance between them and that rapid pulse inside of him just stops. Chuuya's whole body does as Dazai kisses him so slowly and so deeply that it borders on reverence.

Centimeter by centimeters, Dazai pulls him closer and closer to himself until the world suddenly sways sickeningly and they're on the floor, and still, Chuuya never lets go of him. Never stops touching his face. He can't even bear to draw away to breathe. Just like his heart, he longs for proximity without any barriers, possessed by the delirious urge to climb inside Dazai's skin and stay there, but no matter how hard Chuya pushes nearer, he doesn't unearth that reassuring heat of Dazai's body.

He is firm against Chuuya with skin and flesh and lips that shouldn't feel any different just because his blood stopped running. But they do. A perverse stillness resides in him. It's not even that he is cold – absurdly enough, Dazai felt colder when he was still alive – but that he is *mild*. Still. Pickled. A pickled man in a pickled body and it makes Chuuya want to scream.

Dazai's ability to read him like an open book has clearly prevailed as he tilts his head away, nudging Chuuya's jaw with his nose instead of his mouth. That makes Chuuya want to scream, too. It also floods his throat with vicious, gnawing guilt.

His chest falls. "Dazai –"

"It's fine," Dazai cuts in and gives his bottom lip a pet with his thumb. After Chuuya tentatively sits up on top of him, Dazai meets his eyes with a wry, no doubt plastic grin. "It would be too good to be true if everything still felt the same, right? But choices have consequences. I'm lucky to have a body at all."

Chuuya brushes a hand over Dazai's cheek, then leans in and places a kiss on his mouth, seeking comfort above all else. "I'm still processing everything, is all."

“Oh, in that case, all you need is more time and practice, hm?” Dazai waggles his brows. “You’ll have to kiss me many, many times.”

Chuuya only has the energy to exhale a tired huff as he buries his face in Dazai’s shoulder and snakes his arms around him. It’s like a part of him is still in the Mafia’s morgue, hoping to warm Dazai up with his own body heat. Except everything is different now. The pieces on the board have changed. Dazai is back. Chuuya is out of the research facility. Dostoevsky is dead. And somewhere out there, their people don’t know any of it.

“We do have time, you know,” Dazai says, running his fingers through the strands of Chuuya’s hair. “We can find some place nicer than this and stay there for a few days. Or forever.” Chuuya’s eyes close. It’s tempting, so sinfully tempting to put a pause on Yokohama to savor the fact that the man that he loves is currently playing with his hair instead of lying sealed in a coffin. “Or we return to our beloved city.”

Chuuya leans back, unable to shake the stab of guilt. “I want to. I do. But…”

He knows what it's like thinking that someone you love is dead. It’s more than that, though. Taking this chance to walk away from the Mafia now — it doesn’t feel right. Feels too easy. Like an illusion that can’t possibly be real. And how is he ever supposed to know that Dazai’s actually here if he can’t ask anyone he trusts to confirm it?

“I know.” Dazai’s smile is full of blind understanding and it doesn’t look like a lie. “You wouldn’t be Chuuya if you didn’t need to rush back as soon as possible.”

Sitting up, he scrubs at his eyes. He has to go back to. Doesn’t mean that the mere thought of it doesn’t give him a headache.

“How are you feeling, by the way?”

Chuuya hesitates. “Better. Just tired and stiff and…” He tugs at the foreign shirt he’s wearing with a squint. It sticks to his skin. “… gross. I need a shower.”

“Any cravings?”

He means the drug.

“Not right now. Seeing you kind of took up all of my focus,” he admits, grudgingly pushing to his feet. Putting any distance

whatsoever between them feels like committing a sin but he really needs to wash his hair and his body and… pretty much everything.

“Good. You still need to take it easy, Chuuya. You were pretty… ahem, out of it.”

Chuuya pauses to squint down at him. “That bad, huh?”

Dazai blinks right back at him, head tipped to the side. “You don’t remember?”

“It all blurred together, like one endless fever dream.” Something about Dazai’s expression tells him that’s a good thing. “Was I that terrible?”

He remembers being angry – the kind of anger that only corruption ever brings out in him, corrosive and bottomless, but not anything specific details, only shreds of snarls and shouts. It hurt so badly, he just wanted it all to stop.

“Oh, you know.” Dazai sits up and rubs the back of his neck. “A little.”

“Okay,” Chuuya says slowly, not convinced.

Dazai waves his concern away with his hand. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Okay.”

They look at each other for one, two, three more seconds before Chuuya ends the silence with a firm nod and heads to the bathroom.

The shower washes away the dried sweat sticking to his skin but doesn’t make him feel any cleaner, even after he steps out. Maybe it’s the aftermath of having that drug run through his system and poison his blood. Or the fact that Dazai was right and the cravings are intensifying once more, appearing as a low pulse in the pit of his stomach. Or perhaps it’s the consequence of being alive when he should be dead.

He was ready to die before that choice was taken from him.

He *would* have been dead if it wasn’t for the drug.

And even though Chuuya has had a dozen close encounters with death before, this one feels different. Not necessarily wrong. Had he died, he never would have seen Dazai again. Then again, maybe Dazai wouldn’t have felt the need to stay here, like this. As a ghost.

Choices have consequences and the consequence is that something has shifted askance. It is easy enough to ignore but if he stops for long enough, he can sense it. The tremor beneath the surface, felt rather than seen, its impact radiating through the very essence of existence.

Chuuya shoves all that aside, for now, or forever, and returns to the main room where Dazai is lazing around on the bed with a fucking ice pop in his mouth that he got from god knows where, doing something on his phone.

“Are you contacting the Port Mafia?”

Dazai snorts. “I’m a dead man, Chuuya. That’s your job now.”

“So you’re planning to stay dead?” he asks while digging through Dazai’s bag in search of clothes that are more appropriate than sweatpants and shirts too big for him. He doesn’t find any.

“That was the point of the fake death before it… well, became my actual death.” A pause. “Thank you, by the way.”

“For what?”

“Killing the rat.”

Chuuya’s hands still for a staggering moment. He pushes the air out of his lungs before saying, “He had it coming.”

Dazai hums, the sharp heat of his gaze following each and every movement of Chuuya’s as he slips into a fresh pair of black sweatpants. “He must have used his ability to ward you off. How did you get past that?”

“I didn’t. He just underestimated how much of it he needs to use to kill someone.”

The caliber of pain Dostoevsky forced onto him was maybe half of what corruption does to him — let alone finding out that he killed almost all of his friends in a rage, or cradling the broken body of the man that he was supposed to keep safe.

Pain is too intimate of a friend to ever kill him.

“So you remain dead,” Chuuya says after clearing his throat, leading them back on track. “Even to your friends?”

“I don’t have any friends except you.”

“Albatross begs to differ.”

Dazai’s expression twists into a grimace. Chuuya can’t tell whether it’s out of embarrassment or exasperation.

“He mourned you, Dazai. He’s still mourning you. So is Atsushi, who blames himself for not getting into that damn surveillance room sooner, by the way. You don’t want to be the boss, I get that, you don’t have to let the entire organization know, but those are your friends.”

Dazai lets out a low groan, dragging it out for a long fucking time before he rolls over and buries his face in the sheets. “You’re making me feel guilty.”

“Good,” Chuuya replies with a huff.

“*No*, not good! This is emotional manipulation! My own boyfriend is manipulating me!”

That word. Boyfriend. It sounds so fucking weird even though it is technically true. Surely loving someone and getting loved in return makes the two of them a couple, but fuck, Chuuya doesn’t feel normal enough to use such mundane labels, neither does he feel normal enough *about* Dazai to call him just a boyfriend. Husband, maybe, but that’s a lie, just like their marriage. There should be a word in-between, for someone who is far more than a boyfriend but not exactly a husband. Not merely a life partner either. A soul partner. Someone who will defy even death for you.

“Good to know that you’re still as dramatic as ever,” Chuuya mutters, shrugging into an oversized black hoodie. It has been ages since the last time he wore something so casual and comfortable. So comfortable that it borders on being wrong. “Now swing your ass off the bed. We need to get going. Where the hell are we, by the way?”

“Hadano.”

“No one followed us after we escaped?” Chuuya takes a peek through the closed blinds, though the intruders, if there were anyone, would hardly hide out in full sight in the daylight.

“Well, you sort of annihilated the entire research facility. Hard to follow someone when you’ve been swallowed by a black hole.”

Chuuya stills. Right. Fuck, he pretty much forgot about that. Not that

he has any regrets.

“It’s possible they had other outposts,” Dazai continues cheerfully, “but if they did, they’d be chasing the false trail I laid out for them in advance.”

Chuuya turns to him with a grim expression. “Pretty sure they wouldn’t have bothered if they had the chance. The drug would have done all the work for them.”

Why use precious resources when Chuuya would have crawled back willingly to get another hit of the drug. Only they didn’t know that someone as crafty as Dazai would come to his rescue.

“Hmm, likely.” Dazai finally sits up and leans back on his hands as he gives Chuuya a cautious, yet appreciative once-over. “Any cravings?”

"Some," he admits. This concern is not only his. If he were to lose control and catch both of them by surprise, he could jeopardize their safety as well as that of the Port Mafia upon his return. And a leader who comes back as a junkie hardly inspires trust.

Dazai nods as though he has already come to the same conclusion. So he probably has. “Worry not, my little husband. I will be your personal sober coach if that’s what it takes.” He practically hops to his feet, all bounce and energy. It’s a little startling. “I need a job to keep myself entertained anyway. This is perfect!”

Chuuya scowls. “I wouldn’t call having to take care of someone who’s addicted to some super drug that lets them control a whole ass singularity perfect.”

“It sounds worse than it is.” Dazai flippantly waves his hand through the air before grabbing Chuuya’s face and smacking a kiss to his nose, making Chuuya glower even harder. “Now let’s get this show on the road, hm?”

Chuuya tries to get behind the wheel but Dazai exiles him to the passenger seat. Apparently, having a seizure *one fucking time* disqualifies someone from driving. Chuuya doesn’t rest like Dazai tells him to. Can’t stomach missing even a second of this strange, new timeline with Dazai back in it. And maybe he is already dreading those few seconds of confusion after waking, in which he won’t know what’s real and what’s not. If it is not, he doesn’t want it to end.

Chuuya pinches himself. It stings. When the scenery doesn’t change

even minutes later, he turns his head to Dazai.

“I still don’t understand how I can touch you and shit,” he says. Earlier, he was too shaken by the revelation that Dazai was a ghost to grasp the logic of his explanation. How do you make someone believe in the impossible?

“Oh, I haunted an old lady,” Dazai replies without taking his eyes off the road.

Chuuya stares at him for a long beat of silence. “I’m sorry what?”

“You see, I was able to push some things around if I got, uh, emotional enough about it, and she was extremely spiritual, so she obviously thought a ghost had finally come to visit her.” Dazai slides him a sideways half-grin. “Well, she was right. The more I bothered her, the more she believed in me. Her faith made me strong enough to be visible. I talked to her for a long time to… power up, I guess, and once I left her house, others were able to see me too. It was like a domino effect. It only took one person for the rest to fall into place.”

“And that one person wasn’t me,” Chuuya murmurs. He looks in Dazai’s direction but what he sees are the weeks leading up to Dostoevsky’s death and all the ways in which he could have ended Dazai’s misery sooner, if only he had been brave enough to believe. The signs were there. Chuuya felt him in his bones. Fuck, he had seen ghosts before. He should have known. But he was too much of a coward to even dare hope because he was too busy wallowing in self-pity.

The hand that enfolds his knee gently coaxes him back to the present moment where Dazai is regarding him with eyes that are far too forgiving. “You couldn’t have known.”

“I should have. I saw those ghosts at the dock. I —“ Grinding his teeth, Chuuya stares at the ring on his fingers. He never took it off but he used his gloves to hide it for months, refusing to acknowledge the mocking beam of light that only led to the desert of nothing — when all along it was showing him the way to Dazai. “I should have tried harder.”

“Okay, what you’re *not* going to do is take the blame for this,” Dazai cuts in harshly, though not unkindly. “You couldn’t have possibly predicted that there is a place where you get to make a choice between death and a ghost life. I wouldn’t have either.” Dazai pauses to rap his fingers against the steering wheel before flicking them to

the side. “I mean, I hoped there was a way to stay, but I didn’t know for sure. No one does — that’s the whole mystery of life. Or was until The Book messed with it.”

Finding absolution isn’t as simple as rationalizing guilt. It’s pointless to argue about this though, so Chuuya accepts the hand that Dazai offers him and focuses on something else. “If every afterlife is like yours, then it really *sucks.”*

“I don’t think it was the afterlife. It was something… in between, like a place that cleanses you of all your baggage before sending you off.”

Frowning, Chuuya tilts his head to the side. “Purgatory?”

He has never been religious but he knows enough to give Dazai’s description a name.

He makes a pondering sound. “Something like that.”

Chuuya supposes finding rest is easier without carrying all that emotional load even though he finds it hard to picture, especially sitting in a car with Dazai, who doesn’t act like he’s got nothing weighing him down anymore because that wouldn’t be Dazai anymore. That would be someone else.

“But…” He can’t figure out how to phrase a question so terribly intimate and it leaves him glancing between Dazai and his hands like a mute fish.

“Hm?”

“Are you empty now?” it finally bursts out of him. When the corners of Dazai’s mouth rise along with his brows, Chuuya breathes out a huff, crossing his arms over his chest. “Don’t laugh. You said it cleansed you but I don’t know. You seem… the same.”

Dazai, the devil, lets him flounder in an awkward silence before he grants him an answer. “I’m not empty but I’m not the same either. I don’t remember the other worlds anymore, for example.”

“Huh?”

“I know they exist and that I had them in my head for a while. I don’t know what it was that I remembered though.”

“Sounds like a good thing to me,” Chuuya reckons out loud — and not

only because jealousy gnaws at him every time he thinks about the intimate history Dazai shares with all the other Chuuyas and Oda Sakunosukes in all the other universes. Possessing that much knowledge can't be anything but detrimental. Couldn't have been. Past tense.

Thank fuck. At least something good came out of this.

"I don't have my ability anymore either."

"Oh." His previous thought fades as quickly as it arose. It shouldn't come as a surprise. Touching Dazai isn't what it once was — Chuuya just didn't have the mind to even consider that it may be because he can't nullify *For the Tainted Sorrow* anymore. Or corruption. This understanding leaves Chuuya oddly hollow. "How do you feel about that?"

"Indifferent. What about you?"

"I'm not the one who lost my ability," Chuuya says, looking down at his hands.

"But it affects you."

"So I can't use corruption anymore. Big deal." Except Dazai not only disabled the singularity whenever it was unleashed but he also silenced its whispers. It doesn't need to be awake to be loud. And Dazai knows that. "It'll take some getting used to," Chuuya adds. "Same as you."

He feels the weight of Dazai's gaze on him. Then Dazai must decide to believe him. Either that, or to show mercy. "That place purged the rest of my memories, too. It felt sort of liberating, but once I remembered you again — you and this whole life — everything attached to it came back too."

"No gaps whatsoever?"

"I don't think so."

Chuuya spends the rest of the drive quizzing Dazai on his past, both the one that they share and the one that belongs only to him. He asks when they met. Officially, the day before Chuuya's twentieth birthday. In reality, the day Chuuya was freed from the research facility for the first time. The name of his father. Tsushima Gen'emon. He insisted his children all use fake names. What they did in Osaka. Dazai recounts

every single detail from the second they stepped on the plane to the second they stepped out of it again. His favorite dish. Apparently, that changes every few months, but he likes crab meat.

Dazai eventually insists on drilling Chuuya with an equal number of questions because “he deserves to know things, too” and because “Chuuya’s not the most forthcoming person.” Chuuya lets him. After all, this isn’t just about making sure that Dazai remembers. This is about rediscovering each other, one truth at a time.

When the Port Mafia tower comes into view, Dazai shoots him a sideways glance. “Ready?”

“No,” Chuuya says, tension tightening around his ribs. He wasn’t ready when Dazai disclosed his insane plan to make Chuuya the boss with him. He wasn’t ready when Kouyou knelt before him. He wasn’t ready in the morgue nor at the funeral. He still isn’t ready. But that hardly matters.

The Port Mafia is his responsibility now. Dazai doesn’t want it; Chuuya can’t blame him. If Kouyou were to suddenly develop a taste for the throne, Chuuya would hand it over without a second of hesitation. She is older, has more experience and more political capital. She has no doubt made an excellent leader while he was gone. But the last time they talked, she preferred to pull the strings from the shadows. He doubts that has changed since he disappeared off the radar.

Everyone who would want this much power willingly cannot be right in the head. That only leaves candidates who are suited but not volunteering to replace him, and Chuuya.

“I get it, you know,” he says. “Why you didn’t want to do it anymore.”

Dazai’s lips twitch, twisting into something bittersweet and rueful. “Heavy is the head that holds the crown, hm?”

Chuuya huffs. Heavy indeed. Not even *For The Tainted Sorrow* can ease its weight.

“At least, I was born into it. You never asked for it,” Dazai adds a moment later. His way of apologizing, Chuuya guesses. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have forced you into that role.”

“But you did.”

Dazai releases a sigh, his fingers curl around the steering wheel. “Yeah. I did.”

“It doesn’t matter now.”

What’s done is done. Chuuya’s not going to stay in the past and think about how much simpler his life could have been if Dazai had never roped him into the Mafia. That’s just a waste of time and energy.

“Besides, it’s not forever, right?” He risks a tentative glance in Dazai’s direction and offers him something akin to a smile. “The three-year deal is still on.”

Dazai’s face brightens, surprised. “Two years and nine months now.”

They arrive in the basement garage five minutes later. Dazai catches his wrist before Chuuya can climb out of the car. “Listen, I’ll go, uh, silent now.” He makes a weird face. “You know. Turn the lights off.”

Chuuya’s mind races to translate this string of words into something comprehensible. Then he swallows. “Oh, you mean you’ll go invisible? You can do that?”

“Duh. Can’t walk around in clear daylight here now, can I?”

No, he can’t.

“But I’ll be with you the entire time. I’ll come back once it’s only the two of us.”

Chuuya forces out a nod. The mere thought of seeing Dazai vanish into thin air arouses a low, steady panic within him that he would find embarrassing if it didn’t terrify him more. But Dazai says he will stay close, so he’ll stay close. It’s fine.

Still, when he jumps out of the car and slams the door shut only to find himself utterly alone, his heart plummets so deep, his knees wobble. Then, however, he feels a slight presence behind him. Soft like summer wind. Loyal as his own shadow. Dazai may not be visible to the naked eye but he is right here. Probably grinning smugly at that.

It’s enough to make Chuuya’s feet move. After entering the elevator and pressing his thumb to the pad to get access to the top floor, he glances around rather awkwardly, knowing he won’t find Dazai but trying to anyway. “Just so you know,” he says then, “if you ever use

this party trick to spy on me in the shower, I'll throttle you."

He can practically *hear* Dazai's amused chuckle.

Chuuya rolls his eyes and flicks his hand at him – or the air. "I'm serious. Don't use this on me."

Remembering the cameras in the elevator, he pulls back his shoulders and stops gesticulating. His subordinates don't need to think he came back as a nut case.

Despite everything, a flood of warmth and familiarity overcomes him the second the doors slide open. This home may be brutal and merciless but it is a home nonetheless. Chuuya cherishes it just like he cherished every house in Suribachi city the Sheep ever stayed in.

His eyes narrow when he reaches the end of the corridor leading up to his office and the secretary's next door. Only two men are stationed outside and they are not guarding the boss. As soon as they see Chuuya and recognize who he is, even casually dressed as he is, their postures straighten like puppets on strings before they bow their heads to him.

"Boss."

"Sir. Boss. "

"Why's no one guarding the office?" Chuuya demands, jerking his thumb to the set of double doors left unattended.

"The b—madame Kouyou is currently elsewhere," one of them rushes to answer.

"And that means you're all suddenly relieved of your duties? There are objects worth millions of yen inside the room," Chuuya snaps. "Call them in. Now. And step aside."

If there's one thing that Chuuya has learned from his time as the leader, it's that Mafia members are soldiers who need – who *want* someone to tell them what to do. For them, lenience is worse than punishment. It shows weakness. Chuuya doesn't care either way. If they want someone to bark orders at them every now and then, he can do that. It's sending them off to die for him that he hates.

The guards heave open the doors and Chuuya strides inside. The secretary's office is ¼ the size of his but no less expensive. An

eccentric mix of artwork adorns the walls, ranging from abstract paintings to peculiar, offbeat prints of frogs, and instead of the usual office furniture, there are bean bags and plush chairs — even a fucking hammock has been installed during Chuuya's absence. The culprit is too busy laughing at her phone, her legs casually propped on the desk before her. Nami only realizes that it's Chuuya who has walked in when he slaps the damn thing out of her hands.

"Oi, boss! You're back! Alive!"

"Where's Kouyou?"

"Uhhh, good question," she says absently as she leans down to search for her phone on the floor. "I can call around and find out."

"Nami, you're the damn secretary. You're supposed to know these things."

"You try to keep up with everyone here! It's harder than managing a zoo."

"It's your *job*. A job that you told me you were equipped to handle."

She lifts her hand as if to dismiss him. "Hold your horses, boss. I can handle it just fine. Doesn't mean all these echelons aren't super secretive all the time. You think they'd let me know if I asked them?"

Chuuya rubs his forehead, too tired to get irritated. "Notify all the executives that there will be a meeting in two hours. My office. That includes Kouyou."

"Uh-uh, sure thing."

"And call Albatross and Yuan for me."

Nami nods, eyes fixed on her damn phone again. Chuuya places his hand over it to catch her eyes. "Now, Nami. Got it?"

"Yes, boss. Albatross and Yuan coming right up!"

After another sigh, Chuuya lets go of her. He will probably have to call his friends himself. It makes him miss Gin. They were never *his* secretary but he spent enough time with Dazai to know how efficiently they worked. Nami is…

Well, Nami.

Outside, four more guards have already scurried to take post beside the other set of doors. They give Chuuya respectful bows of their heads before letting him into his own office.

Just like he has been told, Kouyou's not here. Hardly anything of hers is here either. The only sign that someone other than him has been here at all is a strange fountain pen on the desk.

Since Chuuya is alone, he risks looking around. "Dazai?"

No one appears before him, neither at the desk nor the couch and coffee table. He even casts a glance around the long table, checking if Dazai is just lagging behind. The crippling panic from before crawls up his spine like ice. "Dazai?!"

Two arms suddenly wrap around him from behind. "I'm here," Dazai says and rubs his nose against his neck. "I was just in the bedroom. Wanted to see if Jiji was there."

Slipping his eyes closed in dizzying relief, Chuuya sinks back into him, his chest heaving with shallow breaths. It takes him a mortifying amount of time to find his voice again. "Don't do that," he whispers, clutching Dazai's arm around him like a lifeline. "Please."

"Sorry," Dazai murmurs.

Chuuya focuses on the places where their bodies touch, telling himself that it's fine, that Dazai's here over and over. Eventually, the nauseating knot in his throat starts to loosen. "Jiji and Kafka are in the penthouse. Yuan and Albatross are taking care of them."

Dazai's laughter tickles the shell of his ear. "Makes sense." Then: "Come to the bedroom with me?"

Pulling away from Dazai takes more effort than dragging himself out of a trance, heavy and difficult but not impossible. Chuuya accepts the hand that Dazai wraps around his fingers in grateful silence.

"I can't say that I saw you making Nami your secretary happen."

He musters a tired smile. "She told me she wanted the job and I… didn't really give a shit."

"She doesn't seem to give any shits either," Dazai comments, leading him through the short passage between the office and the bedroom. It looks the same as the last time the two of them have stood here,

preparing for a battle that they would not win. Chuuya didn't have the heart to do any makeovers; even the bedsheets, he only managed to change after months. It feels like a lifetime has passed since then, though.

"I should probably look for another one." Chuuya lets Dazai push him down on the bed; he struggles not to flop onto his back and bury himself under a mountain of blankets and pillows, preferably with Dazai on top of him. Or under him. Doesn't matter, just as long as it's with him. If he goes to sleep now though, he'll only wake up days later and there are too many things to do first.

"But she gets the work done most of the time, doesn't she?"

"I guess," Chuuya mumbles and sighs when he rests his head against Dazai's chest, eyes fluttering shut and open again.

"As long as she does her job, it doesn't matter how much time she wastes doing other things." Dazai combs his hair out of his face, driving his fingers through the strands as he does. "And it's good that status and position don't faze her much. She needs that to deal with the executives." A pause. "Can I braid your hair?"

Chuuya shrugs weakly. "Sure."

"Let me grab a tie."

Dazai disappears around the corner. Chuuya stretches and yawns before he succumbs to the pull of gravity and flops onto his side, after all. A moment later, the sound of the coffee machine pierces the silence, followed by a rich smell that wafts into the bedroom.

Groaning under his breath, Chuuya forces himself to sit up again when Dazai returns.

"Here, drink this," Dazai says, pressing a cup into his hands, then settling behind him. "As your sober coach, I'd order you to rest but since you're the most stubborn man I know and already arranged a thousand meetings, we will have to settle on coffee first. However, the moment you're finished with your duties, I'm locking you inside this room and forcing you to sleep."

"Uh-uh."

Dazai makes a sound of exasperation but doesn't force him to talk more than necessary.

Chuuya's mind only stirs when the noise of commotion in the near distance reaches his ears. Blinking, he turns around to Dazai who pokes his cheek. "I assume your friends are here."

"*Our* friends."

"Our *friend*."

"I can tell them, right?" he asks, borderline pleadingly. The request is far more selfish than he has admitted. Sure, he would like to spare Albatross the grief if he can but he would also like his friends to confirm that he hasn't gone mad with grief and that Dazai is actually here. Otherwise, Chuuya will wonder for the rest of his damn life. In order to do that, they have to be able to see Dazai, though.

Maybe Dazai sees past the farce because he gives in with a sigh. "Fine. So Chuuya can stop making me feel so guilty."

"Chuuya?" a voice comes from the office. Yuan.

"Now go," Dazai tells him, giving his back a gentle nudge.

Chuuya glances over his shoulder one more time. "You'll come when I call, right?

Please come when I call you.

Don't let this be an illusion.

Dazai nods and pushes him forward.

Chuuya walks out of the living quarters with his heart racing. The moment he steps out, Yuan throws herself at him with a choked breath. "You're back," she whispers, clutching his neck. "You're *alive*."

Chuuya smiles somewhat shakily as he hugs her back, too damn familiar with this feeling. "I am."

"I thought you were dead. We all thought you were dead. Dostoevsky never showed up and you were just gone and —" She leans back to whack his forehead. "We thought you were dead, Chuuya! Where the hell were you?!"

"Long story but –" Chuuya's attempt to tell them about Dazai gets cut off by Albatross who wordlessly wraps him up in his arms and pulls him so close and tight that he lifts him off the ground. Chuuya rasps out a noise in between a startled laugh and a yelp.

“Dude… I thought we had lost you forever.” Albatross finally releases him but not without smacking a wet kiss on the top of his head. “I’m glad you’re not.”

Scowling, Chuuya rubs his scalp and takes a cautious step away in case someone else decides to shower him with excessive affection. “Yes, yes, so am I, now can you please hear me out? There’s something that I need to show you and you have to tell me whether it’s real or whether I’ve gone insane.” Without looking away, he calls, “Come out.”

Both Yuan and Albatross frown at him in confusion.

“Chuuya, what are you talking about?”

Holding his breath, he waits.

A second passes.

Another.

Albatross makes a show of looking around. “Show us what?”

And then a voice from the bedroom says, “That would be me.” Chuuya’s chest sags in staggering relief when Dazai steps to his side and the expressions of his friends confirm the undeniable fact that this isn’t a dream. It’s real.

“Hello.” Dazai plants his hands on each side of his hip. “What did I miss?”

Yuan’s wide, startled eyes dart from Dazai to Chuuya to Dazai again and back to Chuuya.

Albatross opens his mouth but closes it again. Then he stumbles forward, toward Dazai, and lifts his hand as if to touch him and see whether the illusion will shatter.

“No kissing,” Dazai warns him with a stern look.

Albatross doesn’t want to kiss him though. He grabs Dazai’s arms and squeezes his flesh with a bewildered frown. Then, in a small, choked voice, he asks, “But a hug?”

Dazai sighs. “I’ll allow it.”

Albatross throws his arms around him without another second of

hesitation, shaking his head as he presses it to Dazai's chest. "How is this possible? Am I dreaming? Are we all dreaming?"

Chuuya watches Dazai school his discomfort into an awkward smile as he pets Albatross' head for a moment before Yuan steps up to him.

"I don't understand," she whispers. "We buried him."

Chuuya musters a tight, grim smile. "We also fought an army of ghosts once."

Her expression goes slack in understanding, a mixture of shock and pity filling her eyes. "But you're—?"

"Alive," he breathes out. "I'm still alive."

With a sniff, Yuan pulls him into her arms again; he doesn't resist. "I'm glad you found him again," she tells him in a whisper. "But I'm also sorry."

Chuuya just nods. That, he understands too. His eyes find Dazai's across the room, softening as soon as they lock onto each other, and it takes Chuuya's breath away all over again, this bewildering sensation of being stuck in a dream that is both too damn good and too damn terrible to be true.

Dazai tells their friends the story of his journey, though he spares them the intimate details that Chuuya got to hear as well as everything that has to do with the Book. Albatross reacts with humor, a spectacle that Chuuya suspects is just as false as Dazai's. That doesn't stop the two of them from making Dazai disappear and come back again over and over, as though he is a fucking lamp. If they want to act like it's the funniest thing in the world, he won't ruin their fun, but he can't join in on it. Not yet. It will take him weeks, months even, to digest Dazai's circumstances.

Albatross and Yuan catch him up on everything he has missed during his absence. There have been whispers about Chuuya's unstable leadership, which is not surprising. He expected as much, and he will have to deal with it sooner rather than later. The Bishop's Staff has officially been wiped out, but not everyone had an eye implant. Leftover members still roam the streets, using the general public's anxiety to stir even more turmoil. Some of them have already been taken care of, while others are still on the Mafia's radar. Then there is the issue of mysterious creatures that have become increasingly rampant lately. These creatures dangerously resemble ability users,

but without the users themselves. However, in light of what Dazai told him, they are not that mysterious anymore.

All in all, it's a mountain of work. The Port Mafia will be busy. But for now, it's nothing that requires immediate action. A small relief.

The four of them end up talking for almost two entire hours before Chuuya's forced to send them away so he can do the same with his executives. Dismissing Dazai, once he changes into more professional clothes, is harder but the kiss that he plants on Chuuya's cheek makes it easier. Another small relief.

Then it's time to face the house of wolves.

Kouyou is the first to enter the office. Her gaze rakes over Chuuya like a sword, swiftly and sharply, before she stops in front of him and dips her head. "Boss. Welcome home."

"Thank you, Kouyou-san," he says. "For keeping the Port Mafia safe while I was gone."

"Hm, an interesting change of scenery, but I prefer to work from the shadows."

She doesn't want it. Neither does Chuuya. But only one of them has a choice here and it's not him.

Piano Man has to visibly hold back the beaming grin when it's his turn. He clears his throat. "We've missed you, boss."

It would be so much easier if Chuuya could say that he didn't miss any of them but that's not the truth. He hates this job. Hates being the one to make the decisions, to make his people bleed for him, to cull. He loves his people though. He would gladly bleed *for* them if it meant keeping them safe. And so he can't abandon them. As much as he hates being on top, he can't leave either.

***

As soon as the door shuts after the last person leaves, Dazai appears out of nowhere, leaning against the table with a wry grin.

Chuuya doesn't startle; he wouldn't have the energy even if it did scare him. The only thing he manages to produce is a tired twitch of his lips before he presses his forehead to the cool surface of the table. "How long have you been listening?"

“A few minutes. I also caught the beginning but I got bored and wandered around for a while, spied on some of your subordinates, stole some bills here and there.” His voice grows closer. “There’s food in the bedroom if you’re hungry.”

“You did all that in one and a half hours?”

“Yes.”

Chuuya frowns to himself, thinking. Then he lifts his head to squint at Dazai. “So you can walk through walls?”

“Yup.” Dazai beams back at him. “Convenient, right?”

He grunts in agreement.

“Now let’s get you into bed before you disintegrate into a little puddle of human flesh.”

“I can walk,” Chuuya insists when Dazai tries to slide his arms around him and pick him up like a damsel in distress. But his complaint gets ignored. He still kicks out his feet in wordless protest as Dazai lifts him into the air bridal-style. “I hate you.”

“Won’t you let me do this one thing for you to make me feel normal?”

The rest of Chuuya’s complaints die in his throat. Then he notices the glint of mischief in Dazai’s eyes and his scowl returns with a vengeance. “Who’s the one doing the manipulating now?!”

“Still Chuuya. Forced me to come out to his friends before I even had the chance to enjoy some peace and quiet.”

“Whine a little louder,” he mutters, “maybe I’ll start listening.”

“What did I do to deserve such cruelty…”

“Should I start listing it off?”

Dazai chuckles nervously. “Let’s not.”

In the bedroom, he unceremoniously throws Chuuya down on the bed like a sack of potatoes. He barely has any time to sit up before two hands grip his ankles and tug him to the edge, making Chuuya frown even harder.

“The hell are you doing. I feel like I’m being molested.”

“Undressing you.” Dazai pops open the waistband of Chuuya’s pants, then drags the fabric down his legs. Chuuya wants to savor this casual intimacy, wants to feel the inevitable tension that comes from being reunited, and finally, finally having time to themselves, but he only manages to grunt weakly as Dazai works on his button-up shirt. Exhaustion is a heavy, warm blanket and all he wants to do is close his eyes and drift away.

Something hard and grainy nudges his mouth. Chuuya pries his eyes open. A protein bar. “Eat this first,” Dazai instructs mercilessly until Chuuya has no choice but to open his mouth and take a bite. “Good boy.”

Once he’s done, Dazai pushes the rim of a bottle to his lips. Chuuya drinks obediently, spilling a few droplets as he does which Dazai wipes away with his thumb. “Now you can sleep. Sweet dream, Chuuya darling.”

“Mmm,” Chuuya mumbles around a belly-deep sigh, already sinking into the mattress and into sleep. “Haven’t even brushed my teeth…”

“You’ll do that tomorrow. Rest.”

He still feels the tender caress of lips pressing to his forehead before the world goes black.

Chapter End Notes

I think it's time to let out a collective (though maybe a little sad) sigh of relief and slowlyyyy... ever so slowly prepare for the ending that will soon await us :")

Btw, initially, the last chapter (chapter 46) was entirely from Dazai's POV, so from the moment he wakes up in the grave to the moment he saves Chuuya in the lab. It was basically going to cover his time as an invisible ghost buuuut no matter how much I tweaked it, it didn't feel right. I was very unsatisfied. I ended up changing it and am much happier with it that way! I'll potentially release a document with all the deleted scenes that didn't make it into the fic though, so mayhaps you'll be able to read it there <3 Anyway, love you all, thanks for reading and I really hope ao3 is back for good.....

Chapter 48: An Intoxicating Seduction

Chapter Notes

Warnings are at the end!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The first thing that Chuuya sees the next morning is a blurred grin.

“Goooood morning ~”

Groaning, he firmly shuts his eyes again and buries his face in his pillow. So warm. So comfortable. And he has had such a nice dream. It’s way early to wake up yet.

“I guess I’ll have to eat these croissants all by myself then. What a pity…”

That’s not what pulls Chuuya’s head back. It’s the voice. So familiar, just like in his dreams.

Memories begin to seep in.

Wait.

Not a dream. Or was it?

He jerks upright and blinks, eyes crusty from sleep. Dazai’s lying on his side, supporting his head with one hand and nibbling at a croissant with the other, leaving crumbs all over the bed.

Chuuya’s chest falls with relief. Not just a dream. Reality. “Morning,” he says after another frazzled moment and scrubs a hand over his face. “What time is it?”

Dazai makes an indecipherable noise around the food in his mouth before swallowing with a loud gulp. “Want a croissant?”

“No.” Chuuya slides out of bed, scratching the back of his head. “I need to piss really bad. What time is it?”

“Eight.”

“In the morning?”

“Uh-uh.”

He went to sleep when?

Chuuya’s eyes widen when the answer comes to him. Somewhere around noon. He slept for almost an entire day.

After flushing the toilet, he aggressively washes his hands, his face and speed-brushes his teeth. He could use a shower but that will take up even more time.

“Why didn’t you wake me?” he asks, stealing a croissant from Dazai and stuffing it into his mouth. “Did anyone –” He stops to chew and swallow. “Anyone come to see me?”

“Relax, I took care of everything. That pile of paperwork on your desk is finished, your executives are at ease, Yuan and Albatross know that you’ve been resting – as you should – and I’ve sent out some orders by mail. You didn’t miss anything important.”

Chuuya slows down. Swallows the food with less urgency and more grace. “Oh.”

“So sit down and worry about *me* instead.” Clutching his chest, Dazai forms a pout with his lip and sniffs. “Your lonely, neglected ghost boyfriend that had to wait ages for you to wake up.”

“Did you sleep?”

Dazai’s eyes flicker away from him as he takes another bite. “Nope.”

Chuuya sits down across from him, furrowing his brows. “Do you even have to sleep?”

“I can if I want to.”

“You didn’t want to?”

“I promised to make sure you would be okay.”

“I’m not going to die in my sleep,” Chuuya points out as he grabs another croissant and bites off a chunk. Dazai is tracing patterns into the bedsheets, uninterested in Chuuya’s concern or his attempts to understand him and the way he functions now. If he doesn’t need to sleep, what else is different? Hunger? Thirst? Pain?

“You don’t know what kind of effects the drugs can have on you.” He

meets Chuuya's gaze but only to deflect some more. "Speaking of, how are you feeling?"

"Better, I guess."

"Cravings?"

Chuuya frowns to himself. The cravings aren't as concrete as the urge to drink water when he's dehydrated — not anymore, anyway. They're more elusive than that. It's this sickeningly sweet yearning that throbs with life when he stands still for too long. An intoxicating seduction. He knows he can live without it; it's just that a part of him doesn't want to.

"Only if I think about it," he says. "Not when I'm distracted."

"Good. Then let's keep you distracted."

"I know a way or two," Chuuya says, sucking the crumbs off his thumb while keeping his eyes on Dazai, lying there all pretty, face full of grins. They barely had any time to themselves yesterday. They should change that.

But when Dazai mirrors his smile, it's only to sit up and hop off the bed. "So do I! We should visit our pets."

That's not what Chuuya was thinking of. Dazai knows that which means he doesn't want the same. At least, not at the moment. Chuuya considers bringing it up but decides against it. Dazai's bright grins and nonchalant attitude don't change the fact that he is a fucking ghost and that it's not something he can just shrug off this time. He clearly doesn't want to talk about it though and Chuuya isn't going to push him. The one thing they do have now is time. Lots of it.

"I'll order the surveillance guys to turn off the cameras in the elevator," Chuuya declares as he puts on his shoes. "So you don't have to disappear every time you're going somewhere."

"That's not wise. A lot of things can happen in elevators."

Chuuya dismisses that argument with a shrug. He is willing to take the risk of a safety hazard if it means Dazai can accompany him without having to disappear.

The man in question steps in front of him, planting his hands on his hips; Chuuya lowers his foot to the ground and raises his eyes to him.

“What if someone comes in and sees me?”

“I know about the fucking ‘boss on board’ setting, you ass.”

He used to wonder how it was possible that the elevator never stopped whenever Dazai was with him only to find out that having the ID card of the boss comes with special privileges such as rides that take you to the destination without any interruptions.

“Heh.” Dazai’s mouth twists into a sheepish smile. “I forgot you know some of my party tricks now.”

Chuuya’s brows climb even higher. “Some?”

“Of course. You’ve only been the boss for a few months. I grew up here.”

“Fine, keep your secrets,” Chuuya mutters, standing up and brushing past the idiot. “I’m still turning off the cameras in the elevator.”

The ride to the floor below only confirms his plan. Going places without being able to see Dazai *sucks*, even if it’s a matter of minutes. Chuuya’s only comfort is that he can sense Dazai’s presence although that may be a placebo effect or a temporary symptom of his broken brain.

He doesn’t make the mistake of barging into the penthouse without ringing the doorbell a few dozen times first. There are pictures in his mind that he will never be able to erase again. The door swings open a moment later, revealing Yuan, decent, dressed, and for some reason very happy to see him judging by the way she throws her arms around his neck.

“Hey?” Chuuya absently hugs her back with a frown of confusion, already scanning the room for Dazai. He doesn’t find him but that’s fine. Dazai has probably decided to skip an encounter with Yuan and go straight ahead to greet their pets. That must be it.

“You okay?” he asks when Yuan pulls back.

“Just glad that you’re not dead.” Right. Chuuya has barely had the mind to think about that — already his time in the research facility feels like something that happened a lifetime ago. Then she frowns and flicks his cheek. “Are you? You’re pale.”

“Fine. I just —“ His words trail off as a pair of arms snake around his

waist and gently pull him against a chest, solid and real. A heartbeat later, Dazai places his chin on top of his head. Chuuya used to snap at him whenever he did that; now the only thing he feels is staggering relief.

“He’s fine,” Dazai replies in his place. “I’m fine. We’re all fine.”

“Jesus. I’ll never get used to this,” Yuan says, glancing between the two of them with a look of bewilderment.

Dazai gasps dramatically. “Two men in a relationship is weird to you?!”

Yuan’s brows knit into a scowl. “What? No! I mean you —“ She flaps her hand toward him. “— being a ghost and all that.”

“I’m not sure I believe you.”

“Alright,” Chuuya mutters, stepping out of Dazai’s embrace but not letting go entirely of him either, interlacing their fingers to tug him along. “I’m here to see the monsters, not to listen to you two bickering.”

“We weren’t *bickering*,” Dazai says. “We, us, you and me bicker. That was just a dry, boring conversation.”

Chuuya ignores him. Their pets are both napping on his old bed, Kafka curled around Jiji. The cat is the first one to lift her head when the mattress dips under his weight; she is also quick to notice Dazai, hovering behind him. Her entire body stiffens at the sight of him and it makes Chuuya’s heart sink inside his chest.

“She knows,” he murmurs with a frown.

“She’s a cat. Of course she knows.” Her apprehension doesn’t stop Dazai from squatting down in front of the bed and stretching out his hand to her, keeping his movements slow and tentative to avoid scaring her. Jiji takes her time sniffing him. Eventually though, she gets to her feet and stretches before headbutting Dazai’s hand to ask for pets.

A memory of Chuuya yelling at Jiji and throwing a stapler at her flashes through his mind. He screws his eyes shut to shake it off.

“Hey, Shirase’s supposed to come over,” Yuan says somewhere behind them. “That a problem?”

“No,” Chuuya says at the same time as Dazai replies, “Yes.”

Chuuya shoots him an undeterred look. “I’m not hiding the fact that you’re back from Shirase, so *no*, it’s not a problem.”

“But I don’t want to talk to that guy,” Dazai whines, burying his face in the sheets. He sounds so genuinely upset that it leaves Chuuya taken aback for a moment.

“Oi… no one’s forcing you to talk to him.”

“Wonderful, I only have to let him gawk at me and answer his stupid questions.” Dazai’s sniff is muffled but very much audible. “I can already hear it. *How the frick is this possible? A ghost? No way! You’re lying.”*

“Well, it’s not like ghosts are a common occurrence around here.” Chuuya edges closer to him though, feeling a little bad. Just a little though. Not enough to let him slip away. “I’ll answer his questions,” he says as a compromise. Dazai’s spine sags with a heavy sigh, either in agreement or because Chuuya’s rubbing his back. “You don’t even have to do anything.”

“Fine,” Dazai says after a few beats of stubborn silence.

Chuuya plants a kiss on his shoulder in thanks.

Dazai eventually re-emerges from his hideout and scoops Jiji up into his arms. She squirms so much that he has to let her go again but she stays in his lap, enjoying the way he scratches her neck. Chuuya flops down on the bed in the meanwhile, contemplating whether waking Kafka would be wise. He wants to see her reaction to Dazai but he will also be busy chasing her around the penthouse to make sure she doesn’t destroy everything in sight — sleeping makes her particularly energetic and destructive — and that means breaking his promise to deal with Shirase.

“Do you want to hear something funny?”

Chuuya rests his chin on his arms and releases a belly-deep sigh. “Sure.”

“Jiji was the first one to believe in me.”

“Come again?”

“After I tried… and failed to make you believe, I had somewhat of an, uh, crisis of faith and Jiji happened to wander the hallways at the same time. She was able to sense me. Maybe she even saw me, I don’t know.” A distant smile flickers across Dazai’s face as he pets his cat. “She was the first one to make me feel less invisible.”

Chuuya’s chest constricts so tightly that it takes his breath away. He has to force the air back into his lungs. Force himself to blink the prickles of guilt away. Dazai is here now. That’s all that matters. Except Dazai has been here this entire time. Chuuya just couldn’t see him and that —

That fucking sucks.

Dazai lifts his gaze to him, asking a silent question.

Chuuya looks away, clearing his throat. “That’s good… yeah, I’m glad she did.”

“So am I,” Dazai murmurs and returns his attention back to Jiji. “Thank you, Miss Kitty. I guess now we’re even, huh? I saved you from the dumpsters and you saved me from an eternity alone.”

The misty silence lingering in the air is short-lived as Shirase's animated voice chimes through the apartment, followed by Yuan quietly speaking to him. Dazai pretends not to hear. Chuuya sits up to keep his promise only for Shirase to appear in the doorway and halt in his tracks.

His brows furrow vigorously, eyes narrowing. Then he scratches the back of his head. “I’m confused.”

Dazai doesn’t bother turning to him or acknowledging his presence.

“Remember the docks?” Chuuya asks, standing up to greet him.

Shirase reciprocates their handshake without taking his wide eyes off Dazai. “The docks?” His gaze slides to Chuuya and, at last, he understands. “Oh, *the docks*. You mean — he is a —“

“Yes.”

“Your boyfriend is a ghost?!”

Chuuya shoves Shirase out of the room and toward the kitchen with a click of his tongue. “Yeah.”

“Does he not see me or something?”

“Oh, he sees you.”

Yuan is perched against the kitchen bar, not as loud about her bewilderment but still slow to get to grips with the fact that there is a ghost in the bedroom. And Chuuya gets it. He does. This entire situation is morbid. Maybe that’s why Dazai is so opposed to telling more than a handful of select people. It must be strange to reveal something so intimate.

Shirase takes a seat next to her and grips his head with both of his hands like he has just discovered that the entire world is a simulation. “Wow. I need a minute to think about this…”

Well, technically, it is, what with the Book and all that. But if he found out about that, he would lose it completely.

“I think we all need a drink,” Yuan suggests, grabbing a bottle of whiskey from the cupboard that Chuuya didn’t know was there. After pouring three glasses, she gives Chuuya his with a pointed look. “But especially you.”

Chuuya accepts it with a slight huff. “I need more than just one.”

“Then have more than one. We have that time, right?” Yuan’s gaze darts between the two of them. “You’re back. Dazai is. The bad guys are dead and we’re all somehow still alive. We have time now?” Even though it’s an observation, her voice goes up at the end, uttering it as a question.

In a world like theirs — with books that have the power to overwrite the universe, baby dragons, god-like singularities and ghosts — there is no such thing as a clean happy ending. The bad shit doesn’t simply stop overnight. It comes and goes, this unpredictable agent of chaos.

But right now, at this moment, Chuuya thinks as he nods, they have time.

Yuan’s smile is one of relief. It doesn’t vanish even when she raises her glass. “To having time.”

“To having time,” Chuuya and Shirase echo, clinking their glasses.

“And to Chuuya not just coming back alive but with a ghost boyfriend,” he hears Yuan mutter after they down the whiskey.

The liquor glides down his throat like a liquid flame. It's not his favorite drink but it's alright, tasting expensive.

"Glad you're not dead, by the way," Shirase says with a huff, "but I never doubted that you'd come back eventually. You're harder to kill than a cockroach."

Chuuya snorts. "Right back at ya."

"Duh. Who do you think you've learned that from?" Shirase proudly claps himself on the chest. "I taught you well."

"You have nothing to do with that. Chuuya survived a laboratory before he ever met you."

Surprised, Chuuya looks up to find Dazai sauntering toward him, eyes only locked on him despite replying to Shirase's comment.

"Pfft… doesn't mean he didn't steal a few tricks along the way."

"Drink?" Chuuya offers when Dazai settles by his side, still refusing to acknowledge anyone but him in the room. It is as annoying as it is charming.

"Sure." Dazai's gaze slides to the bottle which draws a noise of amusement out of him. "Macallan whiskey, huh? Where did you people steal that from?"

Chuuya clicks his tongue against his teeth. "I have money now."

"You don't drink whiskey."

"Maybe I started to," Chuuya retorts, raising his chin just to be difficult.

Dazai unabashedly grins back at him as he pries the glass Chuuya poured him out of his fingers. "You didn't."

Then he brings it to his lips and takes a sip. Chuuya wonders whether it has a taste to him. He can't tell by Dazai's expression, reflecting no hint of anything that may be going through his mind.

"It was a gift from Lippmann for helping him with a mission," Yuan provides.

"Ah," Dazai says, tapping the tip of his finger against the rip of his glass before flashing Chuuya another smug smile. "See? I was right as

always.”

Chuuya breathes out a huff, dragging his attention away from Dazai and to his friends; there is a burn in his chest, though, and it doesn’t come from the liquor.

They have time.

***

“There’s something that we need to do,” Chuuya says once they are back in the office.

Humming, Dazai brushes his back before stretching his arms above his head and collapsing on the couch. “All kinds of things we need to,” he says and tosses one long leg over the other, “like, going on that date we never had. What’s your favorite movie?”

Chuuya takes a seat on the arm and looks at him for long enough to make Dazai’s breezy grin falter ever so faintly. He tries his hardest to summon it back onto his face though. “Don’t want to tell me? Fine. I’ll guess.”

“Dazai.”

“Something with action, yes? Maybe a superhero movie?”

“Dazai,” Chuuya repeats, and this time Dazai listens. Their gazes lock across the space between them. “We need to get your body.”

Dazai’s eyes slide open and shut in quick succession. Then his mouth turns downward. “Well, that’s a terrible date idea.”

That’s because it’s not supposed to be a fucking date. But Dazai knows that, of course.

Chuuya pushes out a sigh and offers him a grim half-smile. “I can do it myself. It’d be nice if you… stayed on the phone with me though. Just so I’ll know.”

So he will know that Dazai’s still there even while looking at his dead body.

Asking someone else to do it is absolutely out of the question. If Dazai’s right and burning his body could kill him, hiding it somewhere safe and secure will have to be the most guarded secret in history. That’s easier if only two people know about it, in the first place.

“No, I’ll come,” Dazai says. He doesn’t quite manage to conceal a grimace.

“You sure?”

“It’s not how I planned to spend my day but better do it now before anyone else gets wind of my little secret, hm?”

***

Dazai is buried in the same graveyard where the boss before him was laid to rest, where his father was, and probably where Chuuya will one day end up, too. It’s not a bad place, filled with rows of imposing headstones that flaunt elaborate engravings and inscriptions, lavish floral arrangements, and towering statues. The whisper of power lingers in the air.

The people who get to lie here had influence when they were still among the living.

But how is that relevant when you’re already dead? Chuuya couldn’t give less of a fuck where he’ll be buried one day. What he wants to know is where he’ll go afterward. Dazai said he had a choice — stay here or go to that vineyard, which is apparently his version of an afterlife. Will Chuuya have his own piece of paradise? Will Dazai be there too, or just an illusion of him?

He shakes his questions off.

Chuuya’s alive now and that’s all that matters. He pushes the shovel into the earth and digs. With the help of his ability, it only takes him a minute to reach what he is looking for. Chuuya glances at Dazai, who has taken a seat on his own gravestone, watching him work with an unreadable expression, before hauling the casket up.

“Here it is,” he says, voice thick in his throat, and shakes off the filth sticking to his gloves. “Do you want to turn away?”

“No. Go ahead.”

Chuuya swallows and squats down. Reaches over to open it —

“Wait!” Dazai exclaims.

Chuuya’s head snaps to him.

“I changed my mind! I don’t want to see.” Dazai hops off the stone to

hide behind it, only the top of his hair visible. “Alright, now you can look.”

Despite having permission, Chuuya hesitates, somewhat numb from nausea. He doesn’t want to see what’s inside either. Doesn’t want to see physical proof that Dazai is dead, after all. He fears that the moment he looks inside, the illusion will shatter, and he will wake up, confused, disorientated, and alone.

“Chuuya?” Dazai asks then. “Is it done?”

“Not yet.”

Chuuya doesn’t want to stop believing.

But in order to move on, they have to make sure that his body is safely tucked away from anyone that would want to get their hands on him. So, sucking in a breath of courage, Chuuya breaks the lock and snaps the casket open.

He looks.

He looks for a long time.

“Am I… am I still inside?”

That voice — *his* voice makes Chuuya close his eyes and release the choked knot of air in his throat. After another shuddering in- and exhale, he rises to his feet. “Yeah. You can look now.”

Dazai emerges from behind the stone with a rare display of anxious uncertainty on his face, bloodless under the moonlight — and the rest of the time, too. However, his nerves take the shape of guilt when he catches a glimpse of Chuuya before he averts his gaze.

“I’ll just…” he vaguely gestures toward the shovel and gets to work on making the gravesite look presentable again. Dazai watches him from the side but doesn’t provide him with any commentary. The walk back to the car is just as silent as the dead that are buried here — and as the man that lies in the casket that Chuuya’s carrying.

Only when they’re inside their van does Dazai grasp his hand and clench it tightly between his fingers. “I’m sorry,” he says.

Chuuya looks at him. “For what?”

Dazai meets his gaze and his throat bobs. “For dying.”

Three months ago Chuuya would have accepted his apology. Now he knows that he's not entitled to it.

"You have a lot of things to apologize for but this isn't one of them, Dazai."

"It is, though. Everything is different because of it. I'm not the same anymore and I never will be."

"Yeah, it's not the same," Chuuya mutters, shrugging with one shoulder. "I'm not the same either. I was supposed to die, but I didn't, and now I keep questioning whether anything I see is real. We're both not the people we used to be."

Dazai falls silent at that, waiting a few moments before giving him a squeeze. "You're not dead. You're alive, and this is real."

For the most part, Chuuya believes him. His hand feels real. The sound of his voice feels real. His words, his smiles, his presence — all of it feels adamantly real. But that's what makes delusions so vicious.

A stubborn chunk of him will probably spend the rest of his life doubting this strange, wonderful reality — and somehow, he is fine with that. If it's all just a hallucination, at least it's a good fantasy.

"Let's get this over with and go home."

***

Afterward, Dazai forces Chuuya to eat a full meal and take a nap, not shying back from pointing out that half of his psychotic breakdown was the result of sleep deprivation. Chuuya spends almost an hour lying in bed, thinking about how Dazai was there to see it all. See him lose it. The mixture of cold shame and the strange comfort of not having been alone, even in his worst moments, lulls him to sleep.

The picture that greets him makes waking up much, much easier. Tempting too. Dazai's sitting on the other side of the bed, knees drawn up and a lip caught between his teeth as he scribbles furiously into a notebook

The longer Chuuya looks at him, so focused on whatever the hell he's doing that he doesn't even notice the attention on him, the sweeter the air tastes.

Dazai's eyes dart to him when Chuuya yawns. "Sleep well?"

Chuuya grunts in reply before inching closer to him and taking a peek over his shoulder. An extremely long list spans the entire page of the notebook. “What’s this?”

“All the things that I want to do now that I’m… you know.”

“No longer the boss? Slacking off? A jobless sleaze?”

Dazai’s chuckle is eerily high-pitched. Borderline embarrassed. “Now that I have nothing to fill my days with.”

Chuuya skims the things he wrote down with a wry frown. *Learn crocheting,* he reads. *Give Chuuya another tattoo. Continue Chuuya’s writing and reading lessons. Watch* The Lord of the Rings. *Surprise Gin. Learn to cook well. Haunt the Prime Minister. Find Jiji and Kafka a child. Paint. Paint Chuuya like a French girl. Write a book.* “Work as a barista?”

“It sounds fun, no?”

“Yeah, right up until the moment you have to deal with idiotic customers. And open a bar, really?”

“Uh-uh. I’ve even thought of the names for our special cocktails. *No Longer Human,”* he says, dramatically extending his arms. “Because it’s so strong that you will forget you’re human once you’ve finished it. Get it?”

“That’s… wow, yeah.” Nodding, Chuuya scratches the back of his neck. “Quite a list. You’ll be busy.”

“Well, I have to keep myself entertained somehow.”

“What happened to being my drug withdrawal coach?” It’s supposed to be a joke, but the note of childish disappointment in his tone isn’t lost on him. Fuck knows, Chuuya would go out of his mind if he was out of a job, too, so he understands what Dazai’s doing. It’s just —

He got so comfortable surrounding himself with Dazai in the past two days. Getting used to his temporary absences will be like going through a drug withdrawal all over again.

“Chuuya’s not giving me much to work with here,” Dazai says teasingly, poking Chuuya’s cheek. “Always outperforming everyone, even as an addict.”

He is almost tempted to lie and say that he is feeling shitty. But Dazai

would see right through it and the thought of that is worse than the dull ache he swallows before he forces himself to meet Dazai's shiny eyes. "So, what's first?"

"You decide."

Chuuya shoves down the urge to pick an activity that involves him. Instead, he skims the list again and traces his choice with the tip of his index finger. "This sounds fun."

"Alright," Dazai says, dizzyingly near but not near enough. "Then sneak into every restricted place that I can find in the city and unearth its secrets, I shall."

***

Chuuya spends the day catching up on the business that he has not only missed in his absence but even before that. Sure, he has been the boss for a while now. That doesn't mean that he was actually present the entire time though — or at all, if he has to be brutally honest.

The numbers aren't as bad as they could have been. Dazai was so proficient at running a criminal syndicate that it would require more effort to undo his achievements rather than make use of them. So are the executives and the countless other people that keep this machinery well-oiled and functioning. But Chuuya can rely on the aid of everyone around him only for so long. He has to start pulling his own weight. To lead.

It takes him several hours to identify the problem areas and even longer to find out what it is that needs work, every obstacle that he runs into more daunting than the previous one. He could ask Dazai for assistance. And Dazai would probably even indulge him. But Dazai has a list of things he wants to do now that he's free from this shit-show and as much as Chuuya wants to resent him for it, he can't really blame him. Dazai has served his time. Chuuya isn't going to drag him back here, even if it's only to get another opinion.

Speaking of Dazai, Chuuya receives a string of messages from him throughout the afternoon. They're more ambiguous than enlightening but they silence the unrelenting voice in Chuuya's head that tells him none of it is real.

He doesn't ask Dazai for help, but he decides to utilize the various consultants he has in his employment. Chuuya doesn't have a business degree. Fuck, he never even went to school. They'll know better than

him. He just has to make sure that they're competent and compensated.

It's midnight when Chuuya's phone starts blowing up with a dozen texts from Dazai, demanding that he stop working and come to bed already. Chuuya doesn't understand why he can't just tell him that in person if he is nearby anyway, but his back aches from sitting on his ass for so long, his eyes are sore and his mind exhausted; there's nothing he would rather do than find Dazai and bury himself in him before passing out.

After shrugging out of his outer layers and leaving them on his desk, Chuuya enters the bedroom where he cuts to an instant stop. "What the hell," he says, "are you doing?"

Dazai is sprawled out across the length of the bed, half-naked, with only a flashy red robe of see-through lace with sleeves that widen around his wrists and a pair of tight boxer briefs shrouding his body. A matching rose is tucked between his lips. It drops to the bed when he speaks. "Do you like it?"

"Um." Chuuya blinks a few times. "You look like you just murdered your rich husband."

"Oh?" Dazai waggles his brows. "How saucy. Does that make you my naughty paramour?"

"I really can't take you seriously like this."

"Is my blinding beauty too distracting?"

Chuuya makes a helpless noise as Dazai drags him closer by his hand.

"Lay down, husband. Relax. Unclench. Live a little."

"Says the man who's dead," Chuuya grumbles even though he follows Dazai's pull and ends up straddling his lap, their faces suddenly very close. The proximity punches the breath out of his lungs all over again. Dazai. This is *Dazai*. Real and here and not quite alive but still very much present. "Hi."

Dazai leans into the hand that cups his cheek like Jiji whenever Chuuya pets her. It makes his heart clench so viciously that he has to focus really hard to contain the surge of affection in his throat. "Hello. How was your day?"

Chuuya's too distracted by drinking in every modicum of his silly, handsome face to hear what he's saying. At least, until Dazai's brows rise expectantly. "Hah?"

"I asked," Dazai says, tucking a few strands of hair behind Chuuya's ear, "how your day was, but you're clearly not listening. What's on your mind?"

"Nothing. And fine. It was fine." He shakes his head, frazzled by the hands that slide down the curve of his spine and unabashedly settle on his ass. The effect that Dazai has on him is ridiculous. "I'm surprised you weren't spying."

"Well, I was a very busy man today. I did all kinds of things while you were bossing around your subordinates."

"Like what?"

"I strolled through the city. I petted some stray cats. Stole some food for them from the grocery store and fed them. Cats really seem to love ghosts! I didn't spy on you, but I did spy on a bunch of other people, sneak into their homes, watch them do chores, listen in on their private conversations, and all that. It's something I've always wanted to do."

Chuuya's brows furrow in surprised amusement. "See anything interesting?"

"No, it was far more boring than I imagined!" Dazai lets out a loud, dramatic sigh before rambling on. "I took the liberty of using your credit card and ordering some clothes. Well, technically it'd still be mine if I weren't dead but I am, so I guess it's yours. They do these express deliveries where you get your package only a few hours after ordering it nowadays. Can you believe that?"

"That's crazy," Chuuya says, indulging him.

"I know! That's what I said! I ordered some clothes for you too." Squeezing his hip, Dazai winks. "I think you'll like them. Do you want to see them?"

"Later," Chuuya breathes and absently licks his lips before cupping Dazai's cheek again. He is going to try on the clothes and listen to him talk about his day later, but now he just wants to kiss him.

Too bad that the moment he leans in, Dazai backs away.

Chuuya freezes, confused.

“Lie down first,” Dazai says.

“Hah?”

“Lie down. I want to do something.”

Feeling robbed, Chuuya frowns but climbs off him. “Do what?”

“A treat,” Dazai answers with a mysterious smile and starts popping open the buttons on his shirt. His eyes leave burning imprints on Chuuya’s torso as they slide over him, up to his face. “Do you trust me?”

“Unfortunately.”

Dazai pinches his arm, earning a half-hearted kick to his back for that.

“I just want to spoil my hard-working husband. Is that too much to ask?”

Once the shirt lands somewhere on the floor, Chuuya stretches out his arms, then winds them behind his head to lazily watch Dazai undo his belt. “We’re not actually married.”

“Maybe we should be.”

Chuuya lets out a snort.

“What’s so funny?”

“Do you try to marry every guy you’ve known for half a year?”

“I’ve known you for the better part of my life,” Dazai says and starts to tug at his pants until Chuuya lifts his hips. His guts clench once he’s free of the confining fabric. Well, almost. Dazai pointedly avoids his boxer briefs, only brushing his growing erection with his arm in passing before leaning back with a pleased smile. “Now flip over for me, will you?”

Chuuya’s breath slows but his eyes narrow.

Dazai holds his gaze like a possession, a wolfish glint in that expression of his.

With a huff that trembles unsteadily in his chest, Chuuya rolls onto his

stomach and rests his chin on his wrists. “This better lead to sex, or I don’t want it.”

“My oh my, way to ruin the build-up, Chuuya.”

“This *is* leading to sex,” Chuuya glances over his shoulder, “right?”

Seizing his chin, Dazai tilts his head back to its original position. Then he lowers his mouth to Chuuya’s shoulder, gracing his skin with a featherlight kiss. “That depends. Are you really willing to let a ghost fuck you?”

“Would I ask if I didn’t?”

“That’s not an answer.”

Chuuya swallows the electric pressure around his lungs as Dazai’s lips descend to each of his shoulder blades. “I’m not *willing*, Osamu,” he says, slightly agitated by the fact that Dazai even has to ask. “I want it. Want you.”

That’s what this sudden distance must be about. Why Dazai found an excuse to do something else every time Chuuya tried to kiss him. Does Dazai think that Chuuya only tolerates him like this?

He feels Dazai tense above him, but only for a heartbeat. Then he continues to follow the path of his spine with his mouth. “I didn’t take Chuuya to have a monster fetish.”

Chuuya’s leg kicks out but, as though having expected this, Dazai seizes Chuuya’s foot with a firm grip and squeezes him in admonishment.

“You’re not a monster.”

“Ghosts do fall under that term most of the time but if you insist on being politically correct, fine. Chuuya has a ghost fetish.”

“You’re so fucking annoying. I can’t stand you.”

“And yet you will let me fuck you?”

Sick of this conversation, Chuuya rolls over, which drags a soft noise of surprise from Dazai. “I’m sorry,” Chuuya says, bringing one hand to his neck. He knows what this is about. The first time they kissed after reuniting, Chuuya —

He didn't exactly recoil. It was just that he wasn't used to the differences yet. More than that, he was still trying to process the fact that Dazai had told him he was a ghost. Chuuya was heartbroken *for* him. He still is. That doesn't mean that he loves him any less though, if not even more.

"I was overwhelmed by everything you had told me that day. I was exhausted and still half in withdrawal. It didn't have anything to do with you." Dazai purses his lips but he keeps his eyes fixed on the bed sheets. "Please look at me."

After another long moment, Dazai sheepishly lifts his gaze. "You don't have to lie, Chuuya. I can tell that it's different."

"So? Different doesn't mean bad."

"I don't want you to force yourself to touch me like that. It makes me feel…" Dazai presses his mouth shut. "It makes me feel like some kind of pity case. You don't have to feel pity for me."

"I'm not forcing myself to do anything," Chuuya retorts, half-desperate. "I love you. I am into you. Human, ghost, monster, it doesn't matter. And if I want to kiss you, it's because I want to kiss you and if I want to sleep with you, it's because I'm horny and I want to sleep with you! I'm not lying!"

Dazai's expression remains stubbornly unconvinced. "But I'm not warm anymore."

Chuuya's temper softens. "So?"

"So heat is one of the things that makes physical intimacy erotic in the first place."

"Then why is my dick hard?"

Dazai's big brown doe eyes blink at him. If his blood was still running, he'd probably blush — as it is, he just glances away, almost as though he was embarrassed. "Well…"

Chuuya raises his brows. "I'm listening."

"You have a ghost fetish. That's the only explanation."

"Come here."

Dazai drops his forehead to his chest. "Chuuya…"

“Osamu, please just come here and kiss me or I’ll actually lose my fucking mind,” Chuuya mutters, finishing his speech with a sharp exhale.

When Dazai straightens up, it’s with uncertainty written all over his face — and something inside of Chuuya breaks once more. Shoving all of that aside, he waits for Dazai to come to him rather than forcing him.

Under different circumstances, Chuuya’s impatience would get the best of him, but this is not just anyone or anything. This is cradling Dazai’s heart in the palm of his hands and having the power to either crush or treasure it. And just like the compass and the ring, Dazai’s mouth eventually finds him, light and timid. He attempts to pull away after just one brush but winding his arms around his neck, Chuuya stops him. He isn’t letting go this time.

No, he kisses him again and his entire rib cage shudders in relief. He can’t believe that he ever, even for just a second, thought this couldn’t be enough when it’s exactly what he needs. What he wants. Dazai’s lips taste like pure oxygen, everywhere and all at once, flooding Chuuya’s lungs with life.

With his legs coiled snugly around Dazai’s hips, he arches up into him, a guttural noise of desperation escaping him. He doesn’t want this to ever end. Doesn’t know how to breathe without it. A tangible emotion is lodged between his ribs and it swells with each press and retreat of their mouths, teetering on the edge of bursting, the intensity almost unbearable yet so rousing that Chuuya shakes from it.

Dazai leans back to look at him, his gaze darting between Chuuya’s swollen lips to and his eyes, the air between them electric. Chuuya doesn’t have to verbalize his thoughts for Dazai to understand what he asks of him. There is no more reluctance when Dazai captures his mouth in a kiss and robs him of all sense of time and space, reducing the entire universe to the points where their bodies meet.

Chuuya grasps at his hair, his face, the bare flesh underneath the lace; he rocks their hips together and moans every time the friction shoots bolts of heat down his spine. God, he wants this so badly that his bones ache. It goes so much deeper than physical lust. It delves into the depths of his being, a desperate need to reclaim what belongs to him and to give the love rotting away in his flesh somewhere to go. A home.

Dazai steals one more kiss before lowering his mouth to his chin. His jaw. The pulse point on his neck. Catching his breath, Chuuya slides his fingers into Dazai's locks and blinks down at him, working so diligently. Dazai's eyes flick up to him as though noticing the attention at the same time as his palm settles on erection, palming through the boxer briefs.

Chuuya exhales a soft hiss of surprise, squeezing his eyes shut as he lifts his hips to get more friction. All he gets is a snap of the waistband against his skin. "Asshole," he murmurs with a half-hearted scowl. It doesn't hurt, not really. His body barely registers tiny pains like these anymore.

Dazai only grins before he tugs off the briefs altogether, sliding them down Chuuya's legs and tossing them over his shoulder. He isn't even touching Chuuya and already his abs are clenching. It's that wolfish glint in his eyes as he takes in Chuuya in all his naked glory, dripping with hunger, like he wants to dine on him.

"Lube," Chuuya says and uses his foot to press gently against Dazai's chest, a wordless warning not to get side-tracked. Tonight he wants to feel skin on skin. Everything else can wait. They have time now, after all.

"Cruel," Dazai comments but he still stretches his arm out to the nightstand. "Such a pretty cock and I don't even get to taste it."

Shaking his head, Chuuya covers his burning face with his hands. "God, shut *up*."

Dazai retaliates by taking his dick into his hand and making his abs contract. It's so little and so dry, but, damn it, after the past few months, it's everything. The mere act of lying naked underneath Dazai with his fingers around his cock is so absurdly erotic that Chuuya thanks the nonexistent gods above for not making him come right this instant.

Dazai strokes him, nice and slow, while uncapping the tube of lube with his free hand. Chuuya tries not to buck into the tight cage of his fist. He fails. The moment he feels lubed fingers replace dry ones, allowing for a slick, maddening slide from the base to the head, he releases a needy gasp.

For once in his damn life, Dazai plays nice and doesn't make Chuuya wait long before pushing one finger into him. Just the tip of it, at first, a tease, then the rest until there is a pleasant pressure against his

prostate. Encouraging the pace with a rhythmic grind of his hips, Chuuya sighs and cups the back of Dazai's head as he mouths at his chest. Good. This feels fucking good. *Dazai* is good, always so good to him.

A second finger joins soon after, heightening the molten heat that spreads through Chuuya's belly. He starts to feel the familiar satisfaction of being filled. But it's not enough yet. He needs more. Needs to feel all of Dazai inside of him, to sate that horrible pit in his stomach that whispers to him when he loses control.

Time liquefies around him, submerging him in a pool of pleasure and hunger for more, more, more. It's horrible because it's not enough and it's wonderful because this flavor of desperation is so fucking better than everything else.

Chuuya's panting by the time Dazai's fucking him with three fingers, an unnervingly steady slide that winds him up like a puppet.

"What would your subordinates say," he hears Dazai whisper, "if they saw their boss moaning like a bitch in heat around a ghost's fingers?"

Chuuya makes a sound between laughter and a breathless groan. He feels so good, so full, so *right,* that his body doesn't even contain enough space to hold any irritation. He just wants. So when Dazai eventually deems him ready, Chuuya flips them over and straddles Dazai with a hand on his chest.

"Let me."

The smile that Dazai produces is unarmed, stripped of its exaggerated grandeur and magic, which makes it all the more enticing. Chuuya can't help but lean down and feel its imprint against his lips, feel it twitch nervously as he lifts his hips to take off Dazai's underwear, feel it deepen until it is no longer brittle but steady.

They never break eye contact. Dazai strokes himself, Chuuya raises himself and they somehow move in perfect sync, but they never break eye contact. Even when his ass meets Dazai's pelvis and he stops there to catch his breath, so devastatingly full, Chuuya can't bring himself to look away because underneath him is Dazai, clutching his hip with one hand and tracing his jaw with the other. It's *Dazai.* Back. Here, with him. Dazai. The only thing he has wanted for the past few months and by some bizarre twist of luck and misfortune, his wish has clawed his way back to him. The realization steals his oxygen over and over, no matter how much air he inhales.

Parting his lips around a choked version of his name, Chuuya brings his fingers to Dazai's face, feeling the slope of his cheeks and the line of his jaw, and the swell of his lips. He only holds out for a staggering heartbeat before he can no longer remain still, lurching down to capture his lips. The movement shifts Dazai's cock inside of him, and they both gasp into the kiss. Chuuya steadies himself with a hand next to Dazai's head; then he rocks back, shuddering as a bottomless pit of violent longing opens up in his belly, swelling with each thrust. It's so little but it's too much already. His climax approaches dangerously fast.

Keening, Chuuya curls his fingers in the sheets and slows their pace to a lazy, barely existent pulse to stop himself from finishing so soon, burying his face in the crook of Dazai's shoulder not out of embarrassment but because it's the devastating sight of Dazai that has him so terribly wound up in the first place.

"A bit too much, huh," Dazai murmurs, stroking a hand through his hair. There is no mockery in his voice, a gentle teasing maybe but mostly understanding. The same palm cups Chuuya's cheek and coaxes him to lift his head and look at Dazai.

Chuuya wants to speak but he can't; the only thing that comes out of him is a pained noise in the back of his throat.

"Shh. It's okay. I've got you." Dazai fixes his face with both of his hands, encouraging the grind of his hips with reassuring nods. "That's it — just like that."

Dazai's unwavering gaze on him is so fucking reassuring, Chuuya gives up trying to produce thoughts, let alone words. He surrenders to the deep ache in the center of his stomach. Every rock of their bodies shudders through him like a little death, the laps of pleasure no longer distinguishable from an orgasm. It doesn't matter. None of it matters. The only thing that does is the way Dazai holds him close to his chest as he rocks his cock into him, each thrust deep and earth-shattering. Clutching his neck, pressing his cheek to his forehead, Chuuya pants loudly, clenching around him. He tastes salt and sweat and fever. He is on the edge of the fall and already deep down below.

Their skin sticks flushed and sweaty together when Chuuya raises himself one more time to take him in, to see him before the frenzied, deep grind of Dazai's cock pulls him over the crest of his climax with a low sound of relief. Dazai holds him through it almost possessively, drinking in each stuttered, teary gasp and twitch of his muscle from

up-close, denying him to fall apart in privacy.

He barely even has the mind to realize that the world is swaying until his back hits the bed and Dazai's above him, sealing his mouth with his lips. Chuuya kisses him back until he feels his cock slide back into him. Then he just moans, hypersensitive and delirious from arousal. Dazai fucks him like that, driving his hips into him over and over, sucking marks into the skin of his neck while Chuuya hooks his legs around his waist, bucking up into him and clinging to anything he finds, desperate to hold onto something. Dazai presses his face against Chuuya's cheek when he comes with a low, muffled groan.

The air fills with the sound of labored breathing. The tension slowly bleeds out of Chuuya but he doesn't let go of Dazai; doesn't move an inch. He is so warm and comfortable. His eyelids flutter shut — and open again when Dazai attempts to get off him. Chuuya tightens his legs around him in wordless disapproval.

"I'm crushing you," Dazai says, lifting his head to grin at him.

Chuuya just stares flatly at him. Even if this wasn't a very generous exaggeration, Dazai's not only no longer immune to his ability but Chuuya likes the weight on top of him.

After a moment, Dazai sighs and shifts somewhat before relaxing. "Fine. If Chuuya insists."

Chuuya doesn't speak; he brushes the tips of his fingers across his nape, once, twice, and then he nuzzles Dazai's neck just as his fatigue falls over him. As it falls over the rest of the world, too.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: explicit sexual content

I hope you guys enjoyed the long-awaited and deserved return to normalcy and skk tenderness <3 It's definitely not 100% fluff for obvious reasons and we'll continue to see them struggle because that's just the way life is, especially for them and for as long as they stay in the mafia, but I don't know, I like what they have. I think the fact that it's so bittersweet makes it even... sweeter if that makes sense? See you guys soon... for the penultimate chapter... and eventually for the very last one :") I'm not dreading finishing this fic at all haha....

Chapter 49: The Intertwining of Fates

Chapter Notes

Warnings can be found at the end!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Here is what Dazai has learned so far about being a ghost: It's not that different from being alive.

The rays of the sun are more distant, his body no longer warm, and his senses dimmed. The main difference is that instead of only feeling like a stranger in this world, Dazai now actually embodies the alienation that has followed him for so long. It should be tyrannical – and sometimes it is — but somehow it is also liberating. The cognitive dissonance of feeling unearthly while wearing the skin of a human being no longer plagues him. He *is* unearthly. He is otherworldly and alien and strange. Because he is dead, absolved of the shackles of humanity at last.

And while many pleasures have become rather dull for him, he is happy to report that having a cock in his mouth is just as enjoyable as ever. If not *more*. There is something wildly erotic about the way Chuuya's flesh pulses with arousal. With life. It's infectious, this heat, spreading down the back of Dazai's throat and deep into his blood.

Of course, the obscene sounds Chuuya is making help too.

Dazai hums around him. A smile threatens to split across his face when Chuuya's hips jerk in reply, so he has no choice but to pull off with a wet pop. "You're doing good, sweetheart," he says, pressing a kiss to the place where his obliques meet his abdominal muscles. "Just a little longer."

"Fuck you," Chuuya spits back. "You said that an hour ago."

Dazai's lips form a pout. "But I'm having so much fun. Don't I deserve that after crossing the universe for you?" He catches the leg that kicks out with a chiding tut of his mouth. "Rude, Chuuya."

Because he is lenient today and full of mercy, he pushes the same leg against Chuuya's abs, spreading his dinner even wider, before planting a peck to his ankle. Then lower.

“You can’t—” Chuuya’s speech stutters as Dazai’s lips wrap around one toe, his muscles jerking like he’s torn between indulgence and resistance. Seeing him struggle never fails to feed Dazai’s appetite — which consists only of Chuuya these days. “You can’t use your death every time you want something, and what the — what the hell — since when are you into feet?!”

“I’m into everything that belongs to Chuuya,” Dazai says and pushes his thumb into a specific point on his sole.

Chuuya moans, straining against the cuffs that chain him to their bed.

“You don’t seem to dislike it too much either.”

“Unfair,” Chuuya rasps with a heaving chest.

“There are no rules in love and war.” Another push. Another lovely noise. It’s like playing an instrument, really, except no melody in the world compares to Chuuya’s voice when he is feverish with need. “Now, as much as I’m enjoying this, I should probably get back to my meal…”

Chuuya doesn’t protest as Dazai leans down to his cock, the poor thing nearly purple from neglect, and licks a wet stripe across the length. He does, however, wrap his legs around Dazai’s neck as soon as he reaches the tip and shoots him a half-wild look from above.

If Dazai wasn’t already dead, he would love to go out like this.

“No more. Make me come *now*.”

Dazai’s smile widens. “Or what?”

Chuuya’s flushed expression twitches. But he doesn’t reply right away. Oh, he is thinking. That’s not good. “Or I’ll… I’ll tell *everyone* about you.”

So he is really desperate. That, however, also significantly mutes his wits.

“Go ahead,” Dazai challenges. “Tell everyone. See if they believe you when I simply don’t show myself to them.”

Chuuya’s neck flushes red with color. “You…!”

“Yes?”

“You bastard! What do I have to do to make you do your damn job?!”

“My job! Chuuya, I didn’t know I was your personal call girl!”

“*Dazai*,” Chuuya whines, eyes screwing shut as his whole body squirms underneath him with need. “Please. I’ve been good, haven’t I? I just want to come. It’s not much to ask for!”

Dazai’s heart all but sings as he watches this man, powerful enough to level a city, babble and beg for *him*. It’s glorious. But believe it or not, Dazai didn’t plan to torment him for so long. He just wanted to suck his partner off, and pamper him with one or two orgasms. What he hadn’t realized was how addicting it would be to have him in his mouth. How *human* it would make Dazai feel. So he got a little distracted and, whoops, suddenly it has been an hour, and he still hasn’t let Chuuya finish yet.

Petting his thigh, Dazai nuzzles the head of his cock; gives it an apologetic lick. “You have been good, sweetheart. I know that.”

Chuuya sniffs. “So you’ll let me come?”

“I should, hm?”

He sees Chuuya nod frantically; sees his arms strain against the cuffs before remembering them. “Yes, please. Fuck.”

“Alright, alright. Are you ready?”

“Been ready, damn it. Just –”

Chuuya’s sentence bleeds into a strangled moan as Dazai slides down on his cock in one go, not stopping until his nose meets the trimmed hair of his navel. He inhales deeply, not because he needs to – being a ghost does come with certain benefits – but because the smell of Chuuya’s skin, a heady mixture of salt and musk, is irresistible. Once he gets his fill, he draws back, keeping a tight suction the entire time, and tongues at the head, before going down again.

Chuuya lasts, maybe, another minute after the agonizingly slow build-up. His cock twitches inside Dazai’s throat before he comes with a grunt. Dazai keeps his hips pinned to the bed the entire time – it’s just so much fun to deny him, and he is too busy swallowing to notice Chuuya effortlessly breaking the chain that links him to the bed before it’s too late and a hand comes down on his head, pushing him down at the same time as his hips jerk up.

Dazai gags around him, though it's more from surprise than anything else. Nothing dramatic happens but he feels shockingly light-headed when Chuuya's grip loosens and allows him to lift his mouth off him.

"Wow," Dazai rasps, coughing against his hand. His eyes are wet as they slide to Chuuya's slightly apologetic face. "Eager… aren't we?"

"That was for denying me an orgasm fifty hundred times," Chuuya snaps only to cringe immediately. He bends forward to run his fingers through Dazai's hair, a wordless apology. "But yeah… sorry."

"Don't ever," Dazai says, resting his cheek on Chuuya's thigh with a sigh of bliss, "apologize for that. You actually made me feel dizzy."

"That's what I'm – wait, really?"

Their gazes meet. Dazai grins. "I'm dead. I shouldn't be able to get dizzy. But I did."

Chuuya digests this for a long moment before he lets himself fall back, rubbing Dazai's back with one foot. "That's good, right?"

"Sure is. It also means I have to choke on your cock more often."

That draws a dry snort out of Chuuya.

"I'm serious. I think you have the power to bring me back to life – or, at least, give me back some of my sensations."

"I think that's doable."

"Yeah?"

Chuuya's foot nudges him. "Yeah." Then he prods him again, more insistent. "Come here."

Dazai makes a noncommittal noise in his throat, clinging to his leg harder. "Comfortable."

"Come here," Chuuya demands and continues to harass him until Dazai sighs loudly and stands up but only to flop down on top of Chuuya in retaliation. He doesn't seem to mind though. His legs snake around Dazai's waist as he grabs Dazai's face and pulls him into a kiss, warming him up with his mouth. But as deceptive as Chuuya's heat is, this isn't CPR. No matter how much air they share, Dazai's lungs remain empty.

He feels treacherously relieved when Chuuya's work phone starts buzzing somewhere buried under sheets and pillows. He shouldn't be. He likes kissing Chuuya. Loves it even. But despite the way Dazai can taste his enthusiasm, the poison of doubt is even stronger. His body is dead. It appears normal on the surface but deep inside, his flesh must be rotting. Decaying. He is sure of it. There is no way that touching him so intimately can be pleasant.

And still, Chuuya never stops – not even for his precious job. So Dazai leans away first, which earns him an offended scowl.

"You're a hypocrite," Chuuya mutters, though he reaches to the side, blindly looking for his phone until he can press it to his ear. *"What?"*

Dazai hears a faint voice on the other side. Nami, he suspects. The deep crease between Chuuya's brows confirms it.

"— asked for that *hours* ago."

Chuuya's frown jumps to Dazai when he puts Nami on speaker.

"— didn't let me inside no matter how many times I told those blockheads that I have things to tell you, so what do you want me to do? Climb in through the window?"

"No, I want you to be punctual."

"That wasn't my fault either. There was this –"

"Just give it to me," Chuuya cuts in bluntly and rubs his forehead. Dazai hopes he never fires Nami. Their interactions are too funny to miss out on. Despite his impatience, Chuuya doesn't seem to care too much about what she has to tell him either since he amuses himself by playing with Dazai's hair and poking at his mouth while Nami talks like a never-ending river. Dazai indulges him for a while. The report is pretty dull for a day in the Mafia. At least, until Nami mentions something that captures his attention.

"One unit at the docks is asking for reinforcements because of this thing that keeps attacking the shipments. Some kind of freak ability creature. I'm telling you, boss, something weird's happening. Very weird."

"Uh-uh. Send —"

Dazai clamps his palm over Chuuya's mouth, telling him to mute

himself with his eyes. Once Chuuya does, he says, “Don’t send anyone.”

“What do you mean? I have to.”

“Oi, boss?” Nami’s oblivious voice comes from the phone. “Boss? Where’d you run off to?”

“Don’t send anyone right now, I mean. I’ll explain why in a sec.”

Chuuya’s brows knit together but he only looks more grumpy than actually irritated. “You’re not the boss anymore.”

“I’m aware,” Dazai replies with an amused smile. “I’m not trying to be. I’m trying to be a boyfriend.”

Chuuya’s confusion grows. Dazai also sees trust in his gaze though – the kind of trust he doesn’t really deserve, yet appreciates. It’s more valuable than any gem in this world. Chuuya unmutes his phone and without breaking eye contact, replies, “I’ll take care of it, Nami. That’s it, right?”

“Yup. I have a question about my salary –"

He ends the call before hearing her out, still looking at Dazai. “Explain.”

“We,” Dazai says and pokes his nose before climbing off him to hop to the floor, “are going on a date.”

“A date,” Chuuya echoes, not following. Yet.

“Indeed. A date. You, me, and some kind of strange ability monster that needs to be taken care of. What do you say?”

Chuuya sits up with his brows raised. “You want us to *work* on a date?”

“Oh, come on.” Tipping his head to the side, Dazai shoots him a challenging look. “Don’t tell me you aren’t dying to leave this office and get your hands dirty rather than ordering others to do it for you.”

He sees Chuuya’s eyes brighten at the idea. His smile is slower to follow but it comes out too, eventually, just as satisfying as the winter sun. “Okay,” he says, then glances around the room and leans closer as though he is about to do something very naughty. “Like, right now?”

“Yes, right now. So get up!” Dazai claps his hands. “Chop, chop! People are dying.”

Chuuya has an air of youthful giddiness to him as he runs to the bathroom. It has been a long time since Dazai saw him like that. Too long. The thing is that he was the one who robbed Chuuya of it in the first place. He dragged him into the Mafia, made him watch his friends die, made him become the boss, and then made him watch Dazai too. Chuuya has been harboring corruption inside of him for the better part of his life but, in the end, it was Dazai whose touch corrupted him.

He doesn’t understand how Chuuya is still able to look at him with this unconditional loyalty in his eyes every time he turns to him. It defies any and all logic.

“What do we wear?” Chuuya muses out loud, standing in front of the opened closet.

Settling behind him, Dazai considers their options with a hum. “Something dark. Like this.” He reaches over Chuuya’s inked shoulder to pull out an obsidian-black henley. “Something inconspicuous. No one is supposed to know that the boss is out there, endangering himself with his ghost boyfriend by his side.”

Chuuya knows the drill by now, so he turns around and raises his arms without Dazai having to tell him. No matter how often they perform this ritual, his eyes still follow each and every movement of Dazai’s like it’s their very first time.

“Why do you like dressing me so much?” Chuuya asks when Dazai’s down on one knee, helping him step into the track pants they picked out.

Dazai squeezes the firm flesh of his thigh and waggles his brows. “It gives me an excuse to fondle you.”

Chuuya rolls his eyes. His silence calls bullshit on this answer.

It’s not a complete lie. He adores feeling Chuuya up every chance he gets, but there is more to it than the superficial truth; something he has never managed to put into words before and struggles to do so now, too.

“Because sometimes,” Dazai tries, “sometimes I could not even do that and I didn’t know how to ask anyone for help.” Sighing, he rises to his

feet without looking away. “You will never have to ask me. I will forever be at your service.”

Chuuya’s eyes fill with jaded understanding and still, he shakes his head. “You don’t have to be.”

It’s not about debts. Dazai owes many things to many people – favors he will never repay. He can live with that; he is a selfish man. He cannot live *not* doing this, though.

“I know. I want to be.”

A soundless puff of breath leaves Chuuya. His gaze casts down, then back up to him. “Fine. Be my servant if you’re so eager for it. But I’ll be your shield. Like I promised you to be.” He doesn’t say it but Dazai hears the *like I didn’t manage to be last time* nonetheless.

They both failed to keep their promises once. They won’t let it happen a second time.

***

“According to the reports, it appears mostly at night,” Dazai says, skimming the documents in his lap. “How curious.”

They are parked in the loading area on the docks that has been targeted by the mysterious *creature* in the past three days. Chuuya put a temporary pause on this station, so it’s dark, save for a flickering street lamp a dozen meters away, and isolated. The perfect place to hunt monsters. That is if it shows up.

“Everything about this situation’s fucking curious. Abilities only ever existed in humans and now they’re suddenly sentient? Something’s not right about that.”

Not at first glance, but the longer the facts spin around in his mind, the clearer the picture that they make becomes.

“I lost my ability.”

Chuuya turns to him with a questioning frown.

“I lost my ability because I died,” Dazai repeats, “but what if my ability didn’t just disappear? What if it was stripped from me and continued to exist?”

“In that weird place between life and death?”

He replies with a hasty nod. “I think our abilities get removed after we die. Usually, they stay on the other side but because the borders between universes are getting thinner…”

“… the abilities are able to cross over,” Chuuya finishes for him slowly, mouth slightly parted. Then he shakes his head. “I still don’t get it. You’ve lost your taste, too, and I don’t see a manifestation of that showing up here.”

“I don’t know,” Dazai admits with a sigh, glancing back at the documents. “Abilities seem to be different from just biological factors, though. Not everyone has them, so –”

A sudden *thump* from above cuts him off.

Their heads snap up, then to each other.

“It’s here,” Chuuya mutters and reaches for the door. “You ready?”

Dazai feels the corner of his mouth tip up. “With Chuuya? Always.”

When they get out of the car, the roof has a slight bent but is otherwise unoccupied. Dazai scans their surroundings and pauses when he catches sight of a wispy faceless figure on the other end of the unloading area. Shadows respond to its presence, writhing and twisting. He wordlessly taps Chuuya’s arm.

As if sensing the attention, the figure lunges forward, tendrils of darkness shooting out to ensnare them. They only pass through Dazai as he fades into transparency, then slow down altogether, struggling against the gravitational field around Chuuya, causing the very air to grow dense.

The lifeless thing contorts wildly, trying to evade his grasp on it. But Chuuya doesn’t pay it any mind, stepping closer with a frown of curiosity. “Resilient little thing, aren’t ya?” Then he slides a glance toward Dazai. “How do we kill a fucking shadow creature?”

Pursing his lips in thought, Dazai draws nearer to inspect it as well. His brows furrow. “Can you touch it and just squeeze it to death?”

Chuuya reaches out to touch the thing but the moment he does, the creature dissolves into nothing, its shadowy essence slipping through his fingers. He only has time to look around before it retaliates with a lightning-quick barrage of strikes, its vines lashing out from all sides.

“I think you pissed it off,” Dazai exclaims.

“It was *your* fucking idea,” Chuuya grunts back in annoyance. His ability keeps him unscathed, yet every time he tries to capture it by manipulating the air, the creature scatters into a thousand different shadows — and there is only so much air that Chuuya can control like that.

At one point, he just turns in aimless circles. “Where the hell is it?!”

Dazai raises his arms into the air and waves.. “Hello, Miss Shadow! I’m here! Come and get me!”

“What the hell are you doing?”

“Luring it out,” he answers. “Once you see it, you —“

Something hard and solid slams into the side of his face and sends him careening to the ground. It remarkably feels like getting punched. When Dazai lifts his head though, Chuuya isn’t seizing the opportunity to attack the thing. No, he just stands there, clutching his belly, and laughs! He laughs!

Dazai opens his mouth to complain only for another blow of solid shadow to hit the other side of his face. And another one. He could just use his special little ghost trick but that would mean losing the creature that’s currently trying to eliminate him, so he endures the onslaught of power barreling into him and hopes that Chuuya will have enough sense to stop laughing and *help* him instead.

The deep trembling of the docks is answer enough.

Dazai feels the change in the air around him before the thing even gets sucked away. He feels the inescapable pull of gravity. It almost takes him a second too late to remember that he is no longer immune to it. But as soon as the realization dawns on him, he grows ethereal. The ability struggles against gravity, trapped, but Chuuya’s control is unyielding. Its essence is becoming more and more visible — enough to see the glowing gem in the place where its heart should be.

“Dazai,” Chuuya shouts, probably coming to the same conclusion. “Destroy that thing!”

Scrambling to his feet, Dazai jogs over, plunges his hand into the creature’s core, and fades back into this plane of existence. The second his fingers crush the gem, the ability lets out an inhuman shriek, then

evaporates into nothing. Dazai gets a taste of Chuuya's gravitational force before the air returns to its normal weight, the shock of it sending Dazai staggering back until his back hits the ground.

Chuckling to himself, he wipes a hand over his forehead. Chuuya's ability sure has a kick. It's amazing.

"Oi." Chuuya's lovely face appears above. He pokes Dazai with the sole of his boot. "You alright?"

"Never been better," Dazai murmurs, letting his head roll to the side with a belly-deep sigh. It's not quite exhaustion that weighs him down. Not as intense and not as heavy. But it's something. A touch of substance that pierces through his dead flesh and lets him feel the sting of a needle tip.

Chuuya sits down next to him, cross-legged, and pulls out a pack of cigarettes. Plucks one between his lips.

"That was fun, eh?"

He grunts under his breath before stretching out his legs and leaning back on one hand, tilting his head to the sky. "A good first date."

"I thought we already had too many dates to have a first one."

"First official date then," Chuuya mutters with a mixture of fondness and exasperation in his gaze when he shoots Dazai a look. "Smartass."

Dazai grins. Watches him take a drag, then exhale the smoke. "That stuff kills, you know."

Chuuya rolls his eyes. "I doubt lung cancer is what's gonna kill me."

"It's not always cancer."

"Point still stands."

"You just want to die first, so you don't have to live without me."

"Yeah, well, it sucked." Dazai pushes himself up to see Chuuya flick ash onto the ground, the bittersweet twist of his mouth sobering. "Living without you, I mean."

"I know."

"You don't."

Dazai presses his lips together. That's not quite right. He crawled across a desert, not knowing whether he would ever reach Chuuya. The real Chuuya. Not the one living in his subconscious. Then he was stuck *here,* forced to watch Chuuya slowly die inside his own body, utterly helpless to do anything about it. Sure, Dazai knew Chuuya was alive but what difference did it make? It was still a life without him.

There is no point in arguing about something so depressing, though; Chuuya is right and also wrong, the same as Dazai is. "I don't want to know," he compromises.

Chuuya nods grimly before releasing a sigh and the cold tension in his body. "C'mon," he says after getting to his feet and offering Dazai a hand to help him up. "Let's get something to eat. I'm starving."

Dazai doesn't let go of him even after they are both standing, too fond of the way it feels wrapped around his own.

They end up at a food stall near the docks. Chuuya orders ten different dishes and Dazai orders only one, no longer having an appetite. Granted, he never had a big one to begin with, but now eating is like chewing wallpaper, not only dull but entirely pointless — except for easing that rigid line between Chuuya's brows whenever he notices that Dazai is not eating, which makes it worth it more often than not.

"So these wild abilities," Chuuya says, digging into his stir-fried noodles with abandon, only pausing to chew and swallow. "They're gonna be a problem, huh?"

Dazai rests his cheek in the cradle of his palms as he meets Chuuya's watercolor eyes. "Unless there's a way to fix the borders between our universe and the others."

"Is there?"

"How would I know?"

Chuuya points his chopsticks at him with a click of his tongue. "Maybe 'cause you've literally been there."

"I didn't get an instruction manual. Just…" Dazai's vision blurs when he tries to summon his memories of that place. The details linger just beyond his reach though. He knows that Oda Sakunosuke was there. Or, at least, a part of his own subconscious that simply looked like the man. He knows that he once remembered a different, but ultimately unattainable, version of the detective. He knows that he saw Chuuya,

too, and that it was he who helped Dazai come back.

“All I remember is that I had a choice,” he says. “I doubt abilities are conscious enough to go through the same process. They just exist. My guess is that some of them simply slip through and end up here.”

Chuuya makes a face. “Great,” he mutters after wiping his mouth with the back of his gloved hand. “Hundreds of thousand people die every freaking day.”

“Not all of them have abilities.”

“But enough of them do. We’ll be busy taking care of this shit for the rest of our lives at this rate.”

“Hm. You’ll have to shift the priorities of the Port Mafia,” Dazai not-so-innocently points out and watches the wheels in Chuuya’s head turn, reading between the lines. “Send less of your people into battle and more of them into clean-up missions to keep the city safe.”

Chuuya chews on that for a few moments before huffing out a wry breath and stabbing a piece of tofu somewhat too aggressively not to reveal the agitation buzzing under his skin. “Not exactly dangerous but time-consuming, eh?”

Dazai hums in agreement.

“Guess we have no other choice,” Chuuya says after a pause.

Just because he insists on punishing himself by leading the Mafia for another two and some years, doesn’t mean there aren’t ways to make the job less gruesome. Dazai never cared enough to protect his sanity. He only had one goal and he was willing to sacrifice everything, including himself, for the cause. But Chuuya’s finish line isn’t death. It’s a house with strays and the setting sun. His finish line is a second life. Getting there with his soul still intact is the goal here. Out of all the different things that Dazai plans to try out over the next few years, this will be his main priority.

He would love Chuuya even if he slaughtered the entire city. But this isn’t about Dazai. It’s about Chuuya, and Chuuya needs to feel human — so human he will be.

“Guess we don’t.” Dazai’s lips twist into a smile that he sees mirrored on Chuuya’s face; it hangs there between them like a precious secret.

Eventually, Chuuya turns back to his food. Even though they don't speak, it's not silent, locals and tourists passing by, the chatter of the cooks, the distant howl of a stray dog looking for something to eat. Dazai lets his gaze wander for a while before it inevitably finds Chuuya again. Not even a hundred people leading a hundred different lives compare to the joy of watching Chuuya scarf down his dumplings like he hasn't had eaten in ten days.

"What?" Chuuya grouses when he notices.

"Anything you want to do for our next date?" Dazai asks because it's easier than explaining the sickening twist of his dead heart the sight of Chuuya causes him and how perversely exhilarating it is to be flooded with something so ferocious as love instead of the never-ending emptiness.

Chuuya raises his brows to himself. "There's a next date?"

Dazai barks out a laugh, which earns him an accusatory glare. He gives Chuuya's hand an apologetic squeeze. "I believe that's what people in relationships do, yes."

"So we're in a relationship now."

"I came back from the dead for you. I think that warrants being in a relationship."

"I dunno," Chuuya says and stretches his arms above his head, yawning unabashedly.

Dazai blinks. "You don't know if you want to be in a relationship with me?"

"Hah?" Chuuya seems just as startled by the question. "No. I mean I don't know what to do for our next date."

"Oh." Shaking his head, Dazai breathes out a nervous chuckle. "Wow, Chuuya. Way to scare a guy."

Chuuya shoots him a look, all exasperation and annoyance. "You really think I wouldn't want to do this shit with you after everything?"

"I don't know. Maybe you've changed your mind."

"Right, like I'd do that."

"You can."

“Shut up.”

“I’m serious.”

“Well, stop it.”

“It’s important though.”

“Doubt that.”

“You don’t have to tolerate me out of guilt or because you feel like you need to,” Dazai continues anyway. “I may have c—“

The sudden weight of Chuuya’s lips cuts him off mid-sentence. Dazai is so surprised that it takes him a moment to close his eyes and relax into the kiss but the instant he leans closer to get more, Chuuya withdraws. Dazed, Dazai watches him clear his throat and stubbornly ignore the prying glances sent their way, the tips of his ears flushed pink.

“Thanks?” Dazai says slowly.

When Chuuya meets his eyes, he immediately rolls them. “Oh, fuck off. You just wouldn’t shut up.”

“I’ll have to remember not to shut up more then.”

Chuuya tries extremely hard to seem annoyed by that too, but Dazai sees the secret smile peeking out from underneath the stubborn line of his mouth.

“Let’s go home.” Dazai stands up and deliberately brackets Chuuya with his whole body as he leans down to murmur, “I want to do things that you won’t allow me to do in public with you” in his ear.

Chuuya’s next inhale is sharper than the one before. He hops off his chair, grabs his coat with one hand, Dazai’s fingers with the other and leads them away from the shop and the eye of the public, not in a hurry at all.

Their car is parked in a spot that is desolate enough that Dazai takes the liberty to push Chuuya against it, trapping him between the door and his body. In Chuuya’s defense, he meets Dazai’s gaze head-on this time, the slow stutter of his chest the only chink in his armor of confidence.

“You,” Dazai says, framing his face with both of his hands, “are so

handsome."

Chuuya's expression instantly twists into a pained grimace; a new blotchy flush of colors crawling up his neck. "Shut up."

Dazai grins, well aware that this is the verbal equivalent of torture for Chuuya. It's too fun to see him squirm not to do it though. Not that it isn't true. It very much is. "But you are. Absolutely marvelous and devastatingly beautiful. I could spend years trying to recreate your beauty on a canvas and never get i—"

"Stop waxing poetics," Chuuya snaps, eyes wild and bright with life. "No one wants to hear that shit."

Dazai twists his mouth into a little pout. "But I mean it."

"No, you're just *mean."*

"Can I not be both?"

"Dazai."

"What?" Dazai tips his head to the side, feigning obliviousness. "Is there something you want?"

Chuuya holds his gaze but doesn't say anything.

Dazai leans close enough that their lips brush when he speaks. "Nothing? Nothing at all?"

Chuuya has to visibly swallow his pride to force the words out of his mouth. "Kiss me," he grumbles under his breath.

Dazai pauses a breath shy of him. "What was that? I didn't quite hear…"

"I said," Chuuya growls and fists his fingers in the collar of his shirt, "fucking kiss me, you stupid prick."

It's less that and more a fight for control at first; Chuuya's lips are so hard and demanding it's as though he wants to consume him whole, making Dazai to slide his fingers to his jaw, to tighten them, to wrestle back the reins kiss by shuddering kiss until Chuuya's body grows soft and pliant, melting against him like candle wax. It's something Chuuya will never admit out loud — the fact that he revels in submission, just as long as he is forced into it. But Dazai doesn't need a confession to hear him, just like Chuuya doesn't need a vow to know

that Dazai will give it to him as often as he needs.

By the time he pulls away, Chuuya's half-draped over the roof of the car, his chest heaving and his mouth bruised even in the shadow of the night around them. His throat bobs when Dazai traces his thumb over the swell of his lips before trailing his hand lower, stealing the keys out of his pocket.

"Come on, let's go home," he says with a playful smile. "Unless you actually want to have sex here. I wouldn't be opposed —"

"We're *not* having sex here," Chuuya cuts in and brushes past him as soon as the car is unlocked to climb into the driver's seat.

Dazai's grin widens. This was a fun first official date but, oh, he has a feeling that the night will be even better.

***

"How about a movie date?"

Night has fallen outside. Chuuya has already done all his meetings — and unless nothing emergent comes up anymore, he can soon indulge the needy man that has been hovering around him for the past few hours despite having an entire list of things he could be doing instead. Soon. First, he has to go over the —

Dazai steals the papers out of Chuuya's grip and plants himself on the edge of the desk instead.

"Dazai," Chuuya says.

"Chuuya," Dazai replies, mockingly matching his serious tone. "What's your favorite movie?"

Chuuya hangs onto his scowl as hard as he can but the playful grin that dances across Dazai's face burns the last shreds of his self-control to ash. That's the annoying thing about dead boyfriends coming back to lovingly haunt you: everything else, from work ethic to productivity to self-discipline, loses significance. In a way, that's good. Life is too damn short to waste it on work and nothing else. Even if that means being a mediocre boss rather than a stellar one.

Dazai nudges his knee with the edge of his boot. "Hello?"

Chuuya blinks. Then he leans back in his chair with a sigh, rubbing

his forehead. “I don’t know. Haven’t watched anything in ages.”

“So let’s change that.” Seeing his skepticism, Dazai hops off the desk to drag Chuuya to his feet. “As your sober coach, it is my duty to make sure you get enough rest. A movie night is exactly what you need, trust me.”

Dazai always uses the excuse of being his sober coach, whenever he wants Chuuya to do something despite the fact that he hasn’t had any cravings for weeks. Alas, he keeps letting Dazai get away with it, so it’s his own fault.

“Yeah, yeah, let’s have a stupid movie night,” Chuuya mutters, blindly following Dazai wherever it is that he is going.

“Great! What do you want to watch?”

“Dunno. You pick.”

“Hmmm, how about… Oh! How about *Spirited Away?”*

“Sure.”

“Have you seen it?”

“Nope.”

“Me neither. I heard it’s good, but let us be the judge of that.”

After Chuuya changes into more comfortable clothes — because “resting is impossible when you’re wearing work attire” — he slumps down on the couch while Dazai connects the laptop to the TV, which has been turned on perhaps a total number of two times ever since Chuuya joined the Port Mafia. Once the screen turns blue, showcasing a studio logo with a strange creature next to it, an enormous, fat rabbit or something like that, Dazai takes a seat next to him and even slides an arm around his shoulder.

It’s such a *mundane* thing to do that it feels odd. Not bad though, if the nervous flip of Chuuya’s belly is anything to go on.

They’re about ten minutes into the film when Dazai’s fingers come to rest on Chuuya’s knee and give it a squeeze. His eyes are fixed on the TV screen, the gesture innocent, but the way something in Chuuya stirs is decidedly not. The movie’s fine. It is. It’s just that the heat pooling in the base of his stomach is even better, and when Dazai

glances to the side, noticing the shift in the atmosphere — or in his breathing, Chuuya sees his eyes grow black with understanding.

He ends up on top of Dazai, panting into his mouth as he rides him, the film all but forgotten. With his hands around Chuuya's hips, Dazai grinds him down on his cock until Chuuya comes. Then he pushes him down on the coffee table, pins his arms to the sides and starts fucking him like his life depends on it. Chuuya moans and arches against the onslaught of over-stimulation that borders on pain, torn between wanting more and wanting it to stop.

But when Dazai's thrusts slow down and it does come to an end, Chuuya blinks up, ready to complain only to realize that Dazai isn't being merciful. He is just absorbed by the TV screen.

"Oi," he breathes, hooking his leg around Dazai's waist to kick him in the back. When it accomplishes nothing, Chuuya grabs Dazai's face to make him look at him. "I'm sorry; am I keeping you from something?"

"Sorry," Dazai says around a sheepish smile. "Got a bit distracted there. The movie's actually good."

Chuuya raises his brows and clenches around him. "Better than fucking me?"

Dazai's exhale comes out as a soft hiss. "Heh… nothing could be better than Chuuya." Dropping an apologetic kiss on his shoulder, then his jaw, and finally his mouth, he picks up the pace again, grinding his cock inside of him until Chuuya's lips part. "But it is good…"

"Then put it on pause," Chuuya whispers, meeting Dazai's sinfully slow thrusts with his hips.

"Or…" Dazai steals a kiss from him instead of finishing his sentence, his lips moving hungrily, greedily against him. Chuuya has to brace one hand against the cold surface of the table to keep the room from spinning away. By the time, Dazai pulls away every thought inside of his head has turned into vapor. "Or," Dazai says again and seizes Chuuya's hips, "we do this."

Then he flips Chuuya around and the world actually sways. Suddenly he's bent over the table, Dazai covering his entire back with his body, nuzzling his neck as he pushes his cock back inside. "Now we can both watch."

Chuuya blinks dazedly at the TV. “I’ve missed too much to…” The way Dazai drags him into the next thrust makes his eyes squeeze shut. “Hah… Missed too much to pay attention now.”

“I can summarize what you’ve missed,” Dazai murmurs, his breath fanning over the shell of his ears, and launches into a summary of the past thirty minutes, eliciting more and more goosebumps with each whispered word and each lazy press and retreat of his pelvis against Chuuya’s ass.

It turns out the movie *is* pretty good. Though, considering how slowly and thoroughly Dazai wrings him out over the next hour, Chuuya could watch anything and find it amazing.

After they’ve both come down from their highs, Dazai, who happens to have less wobbly legs than Chuuya for once, runs them a bath in the jacuzzi, then comes to collect Chuuya, lying on the floor and suckling on a bottle of water.

“I’d say that was a pretty successful second date,” Dazai says once they are both in the tub, his arms around Chuuya and his chin resting on his shoulder. “A solid ten out of ten. We watched a movie. Had sex. Had fun. What more could one possibly want?”

“Yup,” Chuuya agrees, barely able to keep his eyes open. “Let’s do it again sometime.”

He still struggles to comprehend the reality that they *can*.

Just a month ago, this was impossible. Now it’s everyday knowledge.

He feels Dazai’s chest sag with a sigh and tightens his grip around him.

“Ehhh… Chuuya’s become so clingy. If I had known that all I had to do was die to make him more affectionate, I would have done it much sooner.”

“Say one more word and I’ll kill you,” Chuuya mutters.

“You wouldn’t.” He can’t see Dazai but he hears the fond smile in his voice. Thank god, Dazai can’t see his face either. Especially when he runs his fingers through Chuuya’s hair. “You love me.”

Chuuya exhales something in between a grunt and a huff. “I do,” he admits anyway. He has denied Dazai these damned three words once,

and now that he *can*, he will use every opportunity to say it over and over, again and again, until he either stops loving him or until he stops breathing. “I love you.”

Cupping the back of his neck, Dazai rests his cheek against him. “I know. I’m in love with you too.”

***

Despite the fact that Dazai wrote down the *visit Gin bullet* point on the second day of being back with Chuuya, it takes him an entire month to summon the necessary motivation to complete the task. Whether it’s having to face his past that’s so terrifying, the inevitable explanation that he will be forced to offer Gin, or a mixture of both, is of no relevance. In the end, he simply has to set his discomfort aside and do it.

Finding Gin’s new address is easy enough: the Armed Detective Agency’s dormitory. Gin joined them shortly after Dazai’s abdication. It makes sense. Their brother works there. It’s a decent work place with decent people, and Gin is more than skilled enough to be a detective, even without an ability. Besides, the Agency members need all the help that they can get after Dostoevsky.

What Dazai has gathered from various Mafia intel is that, before he died, Dostoevsky framed them for the murder of a couple of high-profile politicians and labeled them as domestic terrorists, which catapulted them on the radar of every government organization in the country. They have managed to somewhat spin their way out of the web of lies, Dostoevsky’s death significantly contributing to it, but legally they are not entirely in the clear yet. Not to mention that they will have to work hard to earn back the trust of the public.

A dicey situation. The staggering depth of kindness that Dazai once carried for the Agency is no longer there though. All that’s left is professional sympathy. It’s a strange thing, to know that he used to have memories of strangers but having no access to them anymore. Liberating too. Life is much easier when you pick a side and stay on it.

Gin isn’t home when Dazai invites himself inside without even having to use his bobby pins. Being a ghost comes with certain advantages, he can admit that. The dorm room only has enough space for a kitchenette, a small bathroom, a futon in the center, and a closet. Except for a few pieces of clothing on the floor and a lot of empty water bottles, it’s tidy. A far cry from Gin’s quarters in the Mafia, but

Dazai supposes that is the price of stepping into the light. Life would be too simple if the shadows had nothing to offer.

Dazai helps himself to a can of sake he finds in their fridge, though it's only to have something to hold. Drinks, just like food, have lost their flavor. He could pour five bottles of pure absinthe down his throat and not feel a single thing. Pretty depressing, yes, but cheating death has a price, too.

The minutes tick by dreadfully slow, yet the moment he hears the sound of keys sliding into a lock, he has to force himself to stay corporeal. If he was able to tell Chuuya, this should be child's play.

Gin's steps are light as they close the door, wash their hands in the bathroom, and, at last, enter the main room…

Only to rock to a wide-eyed stop when they see Dazai, sitting cross-legged on the floor and greeting them with a beaming smile.

"Hey, there," he says. "Long time no see, huh?"

Gin stares and stares at him until they eventually rasp out an astonished, "Dazai?"

"In the flesh." He cringes because, technically, that's a lie but Gin doesn't know that. Yet. "How y—"

Gin whips out a knife and throws it across the room with his chest as his target before he can even the sentence. Dazai's body reacts faster than his brain, fading out of this realm and becoming transparent.

Well, at least he doesn't have to bother explaining everything now.

Gin's twists in a circle as they scan the room for Dazai, then jerk back when Dazai materializes again, looking even more bewildered than a few seconds ago. "W-what — I don't understand —"

"I'm not a hallucination, the product of an ability, or some kind of shape-shifter," Dazai assures them with a sigh. "So please refrain from any more knives at me, thank you very much."

Gin shakes her head. "Is it really you?"

Dazai nods.

"But… but you're dead!" A moment later, their eyes go wide once more though, connecting the pieces to form a conclusion. "You're a

ghost, aren't you?"

Dazai hates this part. It's worse than telling someone his most treasured secret over and over, again and again. But it's too late to come up with an elaborate lie that would explain his death now, so he confirms Gin's guess and lays himself bare. He spares them the details, only tells enough to paint a clear picture. Gin listens to him speak with a frown that ping-pongs between stunned confusion and pitiful empathy every few seconds.

At the end of it, they wear the same sheen of dazed astonishment that Chuuya does when he thinks Dazai can't see him, like they're trapped in a hauntingly vivid dream. "I…" Gin shakes their head. "I don't know what to say, Dazai-san."

Dazai manages a good-natured smile. "How about 'it's good to see you'?"

"It is," Gin hurries to say, nodding frantically. "It's wonderful to see you."

"Likewise. So, how's life at the Agency?" A shadow of uncertainty flickers across Gin's face, and Dazai waves a dismissive hand through the air, letting out a breath of exasperation. "Don't worry, I'm not here for revenge or anything dramatic like that. I'm only here to catch up with my friend."

Gin relaxes somewhat. "It's good. There's lots to do with everything that's been going on."

"Tell me about it."

They reveal just enough information to chat without crossing any lines set by their respective organizations. The other detectives have been as welcoming as much as their circumstances permit. Oda Sakunosuke, Tanizaki Junichirou, and his sister have taken the lead in showing Gin around. Dazai isn't surprised to learn that their relationship with their brother has remained distant, despite Ryuunosuke's efforts to find them. Siblings.

When Dazai catches a glimpse of the time, he rises to his feet with a sigh. "As fun as it's been, I've got to head home now."

Technically, his schedule may as well be a blank sheet of paper. As an officially dead man, he is free to do whatever he likes whenever he likes. But Chuuya's still acclimating to this brave new world of theirs,

and even though he hates voicing it, his anxiety spikes whenever Dazai is absent for longer than a few hours. Sometimes, just coming back is enough. Other times, they have to send for Yuan or Albatross so they can confirm that Chuuya hasn't gone mad and that Dazai is real, and that everything's fine. Dazai hoped his doubts would settle after one or two weeks, but he is starting to accept that they are dealing with a chronic problem rather than a temporary one.

Gin accompanies him to the door. "Would you mind giving Chuuya-san my greetings? I… I haven't seen him since, erm, the funeral." Dazai watches doubts shrink their smile. "Never mind. That's probably for the best. He wouldn't want to hear from me."

"Nothing that happened is your fault. Or your brother's," Dazai says. "You know that, right?"

Gin lowers their gaze to the ground. "He was there to find *me*."

The inescapable reality of death is that it leaves nothing and no one untouched, compelling everyone to shoulder burdens that are not theirs to bear.

"Exactly, Gin. He was there to find you. Dostoevsky exploited that to make him his puppet — and if it hadn't been your brother, he would have used someone else. Trust me. It doesn't matter who helped him escape. It wouldn't have changed things."

"Still…"

"Hey, chin up. I'm here now, aren't I?"

Gin lifts their head to him but says nothing. They don't have to. Dazai can see it in their eyes, the unspoken fact that he is here but that he is all wrong, just a wisp of a human being compared to what he used to be. Knowing that everyone who looks at him pities him is not pleasant. But he still has the ability to talk to people, to touch them, and be touched in return. Isn't that enough?

"I'll tell Chuuya you said hello," Dazai says, holding their gaze. "I'm sure he will be happy to hear from you."

Gin musters a faint smile. "Thank you, Dazai-san."

After giving them one final nod, he turns to leave, but their voice stops them.

“Dazai-san… would you like to spar sometime?”

Dazai feels his mouth twist into something pleased, maybe even something relieved. “I’d love to.”

***

As time resumes its relentless never-ending torrent, Dazai crosses more things off his list. He crochets Chuuya a hat that looks like a frog. Chuuya hates it but wears it when it’s just the two of them. Dazai loves it. He watches the entire uncut version of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy — though he spends half of the time either fucking Chuuya or getting fucked by Chuuya. He makes an attempt at learning to cook well but gives up once he realizes that he can’t even taste his own creations. He gives Chuuya another tattoo: a tiny ghost on the back of his ankle, and right afterward, he sits back and paints Chuuya like a French girl in all his naked glory. Capturing the mouth-watering magnificence that is his body is an impossible task but Dazai is willing to die trying if it means getting to paint him naked over and over and over. Of course, Dazai also makes sure to continue Chuuya’s lessons in literacy. Now that he is the boss, being able to understand all the paperwork is more important than ever — and he is nothing but studious. Sometimes he will read aloud from the latest book he has been reading and have Chuuya write it down. Other times, he makes Chuuya read aloud instead.

After a couple of months of indulging in every single fun activity that he can think of, Dazai even decides to pursue his dream of becoming a barista. He goes out, finds the prettiest coffee shop near the Port Mafia’s headquarters that has a “WE’RE HIRING!” sign, and after submitting a bunch of false documents, he gets the job. It turns out that Chuuya was right all along: it’s not as idyllic as he pictured it in his head.

Being on his feet all day, doing the same thing over and over is not the problem. That’s like having a break from the constant stream of consciousness, which is enjoyable. The issue is dealing with the sheer incompetence of everyone around him. The manager barely trains anyone — that’s fine. Dazai is not an idiot. He can figure out how to work a coffee machine through a mixture of observation and experimentation. He can’t say the same for the other two people in his shift — though it’s mostly just one since the shop is chronically understaffed and people keep calling out with no replacement. Then there is the equipment which breaks every single damn day and instead of replacing it with new, better equipment, the manager

shrugs it away and tells them to deal with it themselves since it cannot be that bad. And the customers. Oh, the customers. Dazai has fun arguing with them for the first few days, but eventually, even provoking an elderly man who cannot grasp the fact that it's humanly impossible to whip up a coffee in less than a minute when there are eight different people waiting for their order too becomes old.

The work is agitating at best and dehumanizing at worst — and that says a lot coming from an actual *ghost*.

Dazai lasts five entire days before he quits on the spot and walks out. He ends up storming into Chuuya's office, making himself visible after seeing that the coast is clear.

"I'm done with that stupid coffee shop," Dazai announces, tossing his stupid apron to the side, painted in the same brown shade as the manager's shit soul, "and with their stupid nonfunctional machines and their stupid customers. I'm *done."*

"Mornin'," Chuuya says without even taking his eyes off his laptop. "Had a good day at work? Yeah, me neither."

"I quit, Chuuya! I quit! I'm not going back there!"

"Lucky you."

Tired of the casual dismissal, Dazai fists his fingers in the fabric of Chuuya's shirt and forces him to acknowledge him whether he thinks he is too busy for it or not. "Stop ignoring me! I'm going through something."

"And I don't have time for this."

"So *make* time. Why have all this power from being on top of the ladder if you're not going to use it?"

Chuuya's brows furrow when he goes to glibly brush off Dazai's hand only for his knuckles to tighten in his shirt. His eyes blacken as they meet Dazai's. "Wait. You actually angry?"

"Yes," Dazai snaps, nostrils flaring before he pauses. "Well, not at you! But I will be if you continue ignoring me."

The bob of Chuuya's throat is more telling than a hundred words. Oh, he likes this. He wants Dazai to be angry. To be rough.

Switching gears, Dazai shoves everything on the desk that may be in the way aside with one clean swoop, pushes Chuuya down on it, and pins him there with a hand in the center of his back. It earns him a low noise of both protest and approval. Then he leans down and brings his mouth to Chuuya's ear. "I'm having a hard time and all you can think about is getting your dick wet?"

"No," Chuuya lies through his teeth. Literally. Even as his ass presses back against Dazai's crotch.

"Like I can't smell your arousal from a fucking mile away."

"Thought you were a ghost, not a damn werewolf."

Dazai responds by giving his ass a hard smack, barely able to contain his laughter when Chuuya moans like a bitch in heat. "I don't need to be to know that my beloved partner is a needy slut."

Their performance borders on too much but judging by the way Chuuya's mouth parts around a silent gasp and the way Dazai feels his own cock grow in his pants, it's just the right amount of exaggerated aggression to get them going.

Their sex life is something that has simultaneously remained the same and drastically changed. They fucked before. They fucked a lot and well, too. That's not any different now. What *is,* is that all restraint has evaporated somewhere along the way, replaced by a boundless, wild desire to get each other off in every which way, to see everything, to expose every single thought that turns them on and turn it into reality. They don't hold back anymore.

Chuuya loves it rough. He loves it when Dazai can match his physical prowess and force him down even when he struggles against it like an animal caught in a trap. Loves being forced into submission — though on time-sensitive occasions, he surrenders rather quickly, the adrenaline of getting caught substituting the rush of being defeated. Sometimes, like today, he loves it loud and aggressive.

"Fine, if you want it that badly that you can't even hear me out for five minutes," Dazai wrenches down Chuuya's slacks and his briefs by sheer force and is presented with the glorious sight of his ass, round and perky, "*here."*

"I have a — have a meeting."

"Ah, so you want me to stop?"

Chuuya doesn't give him an answer. He can't.

"Yeah, didn't think so."

He only has to open a drawer to find a bottle of lube — which is intentional, thank you very much. Chuuya only breaks his stubborn silence once Dazai presses two of his lubed fingers into him, his entire spine shuddering with the sigh of relief that he chokes out. His slacks are around his thighs, restricting his movements, not allowing him much to do except to take what he's given, but Chuuya is shockingly, yes, fascinatingly, even, appreciative today, arching back against Dazai's digits like they're everything he needs.

He rewards Chuuya with a third finger, though only to stretch him with two, three, or four more thrusts before he withdraws them again to get his cock out.

"When's the meeting?" Dazai wonders out loud, giving himself a few strokes. When he doesn't receive an answer, he reaches over Chuuya, deliberately letting his cock brush against his cheeks, to grab a fistful of Chuuya's hair. "When's the meeting, Chuuya?"

"Ten," he rasps out. "Ten minutes."

"Now was that so hard?" As soon as Dazai lets go of his hair, Chuuya slumps back over the desk, pressing his forehead to its surface. And Dazai thought *he* was in a mood today. Chuuya's only ever this pliant and quiet when something is really bothering him. He still eagerly arches his spine and lifts his hips when Dazai slides the tip of his cock over his rim, not pushing in yet but teasing him with what's about to come.

It's the whine that Chuuya makes that eventually drives Dazai's hips forward and into Chuuya at last, steadying him with a hand around the crease of his thigh. He buries himself slowly, savoring the feeling for the both of them, before pausing once he bottoms out.

"That what you wanted?" he asks, draping himself over Chuuya until he can press his mouth to his shoulder while his arms bracket him in.

Eyes closed, Chuuya leans his head back against him.

Dazai pulls back a bit, then slams back into him, the slap of their skin echoing through the office. "The least you can do is pay attention to me now. Is *this* what you wanted?"

"Yes," Chuuya finally hisses back, followed by a punched-out breath as Dazai gives him another pointed thrust, aiming for his prostate. "Yes, that's what I fucking wanted. Can you stop talking alr— hah…. *fuck*."

The harsh pace Dazai sets steals the words out of his mouth and plasters him to the desk. The only sounds Chuuya makes are loud, uncontrollable pants.

"I hope your executives will be in time to see you like this," Dazai whispers hotly into his ear before tangling his fingers in his locks again and tugging at them, his hips slowing into a deep, pulsing grind. Chuuya's shaking too hard around him and to finish so early would be no fun. "I'll make myself invisible, of course. Imagine what a sight you'll make, bent over a table, moaning like a slut for no one at all. Everyone will think you're insane."

"Everyone already thinks I'm insane," Chuuya growls and somehow manages to push himself back onto Dazai's cock enough to make his thighs shudder despite his unfortunate position. Being horny makes him very creative. "So let them see — fuck them. And fuck *you*."

"Yeah, I am fucking you." Grabbing his hips, Dazai punctures his statement with a mean thrust, pressing his length deep and staying there, circling his hips. Chuuya's composure shatters like glass. Gasping, he scrambles for something to hold onto on the desk, accidentally pushing a dozen things off his desk in the process.

"Because you're so fucking needy all the time that you can't go without my dick for more than two hours a day," Dazai continues, grinding his cock against Chuuya's prostate and his words against his temper. Just a little more pressure and Chuuya will crack. One or two carefully phrased accusations and —

"'S the fucking least you can do, you…" Chuuya shakes his head from side to side like he can't decide between flinching away from the overwhelming stimulation and embracing it. "You do nothing but b-bother me all day — and still have the fucking audacity to *complain* — ah, fuck, shit. I'm *close*. I'm gonna —"

Several labored breaths later, Chuuya clenches so furiously around him so hard that Dazai grows light-headed, barely able to remain on his feet. His thighs shake from the strain as he fucks Chuuya through his orgasm before the maddening pulse of his walls drags Dazai right after him and he buries his grunt in the warm, salty flesh of Chuuya's shoulder.

Once his vision returns to him, he lets out a breathless chuckle.

“Shit, we made a mess,” Chuuya mutters, shoving Dazai off him and surveying the damage with an unhappy, yet paradoxically relaxed, scowl.

Slumping onto the chair, Dazai smiles, then lets his gaze sweep down Chuuya’s thighs. A mess indeed.

Chuuya notices and pulls up his slacks, grunting in annoyance. “’S your fucking fault. Now I get to sit through a meeting with your shit in my briefs — and why are you just sitting here? Do something!”

His running commentary is a discomforting reminder of the accusations he spat out not too long ago. There is a reason they have so much sex, and it’s not only because it’s fun and thrilling. Sometimes it’s the only way to find release. The only place where they can be brutally honest with each other. Not every insult necessarily comes from a place of truth but it *can*.

“Are you angry that I’m not always here?”

“No,” Chuuya instantly denies. There is a certain tension in his shoulders though that speaks of the opposite. He hastily wipes across his desk with a wet wipe. Then, noticing Dazai’s raised brows, his expression twists into a scowl and he tosses the used tissue at him. “I’m not angry. I just…”

“Just what?” Dazai asks, wanting to be patient but knowing that he doesn’t have the time right now. Once Chuuya sends him away so he can have his meeting, the conversation’s done and won’t come up again until they’re in the middle of sex.

Chuuya stares at him for a moment, frustration simmering under his hard-set jaw and tight mouth, before his chest falls and he scrubs a hand across his face, releasing the heat with a tepid sigh. “I guess, it does kinda piss me off. You wanted to leave this place — I know that, and I’m not going to force you to come back. Just sucks sometimes. That’s all.”

“Me being away? Or me not being involved in Port Mafia business?”

“Fuck if I knew.” Shaking his head, he listlessly gestures at him. “Look, it doesn’t matter. I had a shitty day, and so did you.”

The *except your bad day was about rude customers and mine was about*

the lives of human beings goes unspoken.

Dazai is as much at a loss here as he is. He can see where Chuuya's irritation comes from. It's not fair that he got stuck with the job that Dazai pushed down on him.

But Chuuya had the choice to leave. He still has it. All he has to do is say the words and Dazai will whip up an elaborate plan to make it all happen — but Chuuya isn't going to. Not until his time is up. He is too proud and too fucking obsessed with the guilt that's chaining him to the Port Mafia.

In this matter, they are at crossroads.

As much as Dazai wants to present him with a solution, a compromise, his mind comes up blank. He didn't defy death only to come and live his old life all over again. He doesn't want his old life. This one — it's a long way from perfect but it's something. It has substance. He is no longer just sleepwalking through his days. He is *awake*.

He sees Chuuya form the same conclusion in his eyes before he looks away. "It doesn't matter. Just forget it."

"Saying it twice won't make it true," Dazai retorts.

"Not saying it won't fucking solve it either," Chuuya snaps back, using his ability to clean up the mess on his desk. "You don't wanna have anything to do with the Mafia. I get it. Doesn't mean it won't fucking piss me off — and I have a meeting now."

Standing up, Dazai forces his discomfort aside and plants a kiss on the corner of Chuuya's mouth even though they're annoyed with each other. Maybe even because they're so annoyed with each other. "I'll be back later."

Chuuya's spine is rigid. He doesn't flinch away from the gesture though. Doesn't push Dazai away. He accepts it with a silent nod.

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Dazai relieves his abysmal mood by plotting the demise of his former workplace. He could rob the shop at gunpoint. Easier even, he could just break in at night and leave it in physical and financial ruin. Or he could focus his scheming on the manager alone. Maybe find out if he has a girlfriend, a boyfriend, a spouse — some sort of connection that's deep enough that a cut would hurt.

None of his plans feel sate the starved irritation running through his veins. Probably because it has nothing to do with the coffee shop and everything with Chuuya's frustrations that Dazai is causing him. He ends up with a rather plain plan to fire the manager and replace him and the broken equipment with someone more decent, all with the help of the Mafia's resources.

It is then that he re-examines the list he has made.

Haunt the Prime Minister, one bullet point says. Dazai presses his lips shut as he thinks about his past, the choices he made, and the options that now lie ahead of him. Maybe there is an answer to this problem, and maybe it's easier than he thought it would be.

***

"I want a job," Dazai says several hours later, standing on the threshold of the bathroom where Chuuya is brushing his teeth.

Chuuya's eyes flicker to him, skeptical, but he doesn't hurry to spit out the toothpaste and answer. "What's next on the list? Bartender?"

"I want a job from you," Dazai clarifies.

This time, Chuuya does pause, raising his brows. "Hah?"

"You heard me. I want to work for you. Not for the Port Mafia, but for you, Nakahara Chuuya."

"Like… as my bodyguard or what?"

Dazai breathes out a laugh, uncrossing his arms to cross the distance between them. "Well, you don't exactly need a bodyguard. I was thinking more of something like, hmmm, your spy."

"My spy?" Chuuya frowns at him in the reflection of the mirror. "I have Piano Man for that."

"Chuuya, I'm making an effort here," Dazai says with a sigh.

That makes Chuuya blink in surprise. "I just don't get the point of this. You don't want to be involved in this shit. Being my spy makes you involved."

"I don't mind if it's you."

"Sure you do."

“I’m telling you I don’t. Now will you please stop telling me how to feel?”

“You…” Making a low sound of irritation, Chuuya aggressively washes his face and towels it dry before he whirls around to Dazai. “I don’t want you to do shit just for me. I don’t need it.”

“What if I want it?”

“You have an entire list that tells me you don’t want it.”

“And I’ve almost finished the list. Now I have a new one. Newsflash: people can change their minds.” Seeing that Chuuya isn’t about to budge any time soon, Dazai takes a step closer. Brings a hand to his face, forcing him to look him in the eye and see that Dazai’s earnest about this. “I made you a promise. You get three years and I help you out from the shadows. *That* was the deal. All I’m doing is holding up my end of the deal.”

“That was before you *died*,” Chuuya tells him, his eyes big, icy, and unforgiving. “This job killed you and I’m not going to let it happen again.”

“So what? Damned if I do and damned if I don’t?”

“Yeah. I told you, it is what it fucking is, Dazai. Just ‘cause I’m mildly annoyed doesn’t mean you have to do shit to appease me.”

Dazai could let it go. He could. And in the grand scheme of things, it would be fine. Not perfect — but what ever is? It would simply be a small bump in their relationship now and then. Normal.

But today, he decides that he doesn’t want to stumble over this problem every few weeks. “It’s not just what it fucking is, Chuuya, if I’m offering you a compromise right here and right now. Let me help you.” He doesn’t give Chuuya the chance to reject him. Pushing him against the sink with his body, Dazai grabs his face and — squeezes his cheeks as gently as he can in his state of mind. “Let. Me. Help. You,” he demands through clenched teeth, “you stubborn piece of work. Let me help you, damn it!”

“Let *go* of me.”

“No! Let me help you!”

“Dazai, you — let —“

Dazai's shaking him at this point. "Let me *help* you before I lose my fucking mind!"

"Fine!" Chuuya exclaims, jerking away from him with a pair of bewildered eyes, his expression flickering between aversion and morbid interest. "Jesus. What's wrong with you?"

Dazai feels a pleased smile dance across his face as he steps back, releasing a content sigh. "So many things. Heh, now that this is settled, come to bed already. I could use some snuggling."

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Despite the circumstances that led to Dazai's new job, what he is doing *is* quite helpful. Really. Ever since the Bishop's Staff rise and ultimate fall, the Port Mafia has been dealing with a lot of push-back from the public and the government, so having someone to spy on certain people is exactly what Chuuya needs. And Dazai? He is happy to provide.

He means it, too.

He has always found it rather fascinating to sit back and observe people. Watch the way they move through the world. The things they say and the muscles that twitch in their bodies when they lie. What they do when they are alone. It fills him with a perplexing concoction of envy, fascination and disgust. It's like watching someone else have everything you want and squander it.

Being a ghost is a blessing and a curse.

Dazai hasn't haunted the prime minister (yet), but he spies on many different politicians that are relevant to the Mafia's agenda. And he is good at it. He comes home with results that make Chuuya's job as the boss more tolerable every time. Task by task, Chuuya begins to see it, too — not only what a good team they make but that Dazai handles the work just fine.

Now it's not perfect. The Port Mafia has always been and will always be a gilded cage; no matter how many pretty paintings can be found on the walls, eventually they will start to feel suffocating, especially someone like Chuuya. And once Chuuya's sick, it doesn't take longer for the virus to spread over to Dazai. But with effort and a lot of trial runs, they are able to make it somewhat bearable until they can leave this place once and for all.

Chuuya starts assigning him bigger, longer jobs. Jobs that require him to be away for several days, sometimes even up to a week. Dazai suspects that's on purpose. Chuuya still struggles to cope with his absence, not as often and as hard as he did at the beginning, but enough to make a week without each other a challenge of faith.

It's after one of such jobs that Dazai comes home late at night, worn out and in desperate need of Chuuya's body heat, leaving a trail of his clothing on the way to the bed in the dim bedroom before he finally slips under the sheets. He slides his arm around Chuuya and promptly pauses. Instead of only grabbing one waist, he touches two.

He sits up to scowl at the intruder. A suspicious smear of pink hair confirms his suspicion. Yuan.

His first instinct is to shove her out of their bed. That would wake her though, causing noise and possibly disrupting Chuuya's sleep. So he swallows his annoyance and pointedly pulls Chuuya, and only Chuuya, back against his chest, burying his nose in his neck, leeching off his intoxicating body heat. Chuuya smacks his lips in his sleep before sighing and melting into the embrace. Dazai will survive sharing a bed with someone else, just as long as he doesn't have to share Chuuya.

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The next morning he awakes to Chuuya rubbing his ass against his crotch. Squinting, Dazai lifts his head off the pillow. Chuuya's not entirely awake but in the process of coming to – and already horny. As much as Dazai would love to fuck him awake, a glance to the other side of the bed also reveals that the intruder has not left.

Dazai plants one hand on Chuuya's hip, flexing with each lazy grind, and brings his mouth to his ear. "Morning."

"Mmmm… mornin'," Chuuya mumbles, tilting a bit to touch Dazai's face even though his eyes remain closed. "You're back. Missed you."

Dazai presses the outline of his smile to his neck. "I missed you, too."

Instead of responding, Chuuya tries to nestle his ass harder against him, making a noise of irritation when Dazai keeps him pinned in place.

"There is someone else sleeping in our bed," Dazai whispers sweetly.

As if only remembering now, Chuuya stiffens, then muffles a low groan in his pillow before finally blinking his eyes open. He looks at Yuan, then at Dazai. “I asked her to stay with me.”

Dazai strokes the tip of his finger over Chuuya’s collarbones. “Mmm… so now you’ll just have to deal with the consequences.”

“She’s sleeping...”

“She’s *not*!” Yuan suddenly says, jerking upright. She turns a red-eyed frown on them. “She’s not sleeping and would prefer not to be here when you start fucking.”

Chuuya cracks a sheepish laugh. “Heh. Sorry.”

“Well, now that you’re up, you can leave.” Her presence doesn’t stop Dazai from pressing a kiss to Chuuya’s jaw though, proudly possessive. “Goodbye.”

Yuan climbs out of bed with a huff. “You know, I slept here because *your* boyfriend asked me to. You should be thanking me instead of kicking me out.”

“Maybe I’ll find some gratitude in me after I fuck my boyfriend.”

Chuuya makes a noise, something in between a mortified shriek and a chiding grunt.

“I liked you better when you were dead,” Yuan mutters and sends them one last glare before stomping away.

“You’re –” Chuuya’s words dissolve around a breathy moan as Dazai suckles on the delicate skin of his neck; he grapples blindly at Dazai’s hair.

Dazai soothes the sting with his tongue, then his lips, before he smiles up at him. “I’m what?”

Rolling around to face him, Chuuya narrows his eyes, watching him with an intensity that borders on reverence. “You’re here,” is what he says in the end.

The words pull Dazai close, pressing a kiss to his lips that he’s been waiting to give him for a while now and humming against him. Cupping Chuuya’s chin, he murmurs, “I am.”

Chuuya’s throat bobs when he pulls away. “I wasn’t sure you’d be.”

His mouth presses into a self-conscious line, and the rare display of vulnerability robs Dazai of all thoughts even now. “That’s why Yuan stayed over.”

“I figured,” he says, trailing his knuckles over Chuuya’s cheekbone. “You could have called me. You can always call me, no matter what time it is. You know that, right?”

“I know. I just — I don’t…” Chuuya trails off with an unhappy sigh, looking at his hand as they absently play with the covers instead of at him.

Dazai suspects he knows what it is that’s trapped in his chest and so hard to put into words, but it’s not his confession to utter. So he waits. Encourages Chuuya with patience and the fingers that knead the flesh of his arm, whether he wants to speak or save it for another time.

“I don’t want to be dependent on you,” Chuuya admits after a stretch of contemplative silence; he sounds like he isn’t trying to convince Dazai though, but himself. “I can live without you. I *have* lived without you. I just don’t know what’s real and what isn’t sometimes.”

“I could live without you, too.” Dazai pauses when Chuuya’s gaze flickers to him, his brows drawing together, trying to discern the point he is painting. “I probably could have come back without hanging onto the idea of you either, but it was so much easier to fight to return to *you* than to fight for only myself. Was it wise? I don’t know. Maybe not. It helped me, though, and I don’t think that’s a bad thing.”

“What are you saying?” The question is a quiet murmur, searching not for an answer but for reassurance.

Dazai offers Chuuya a small, helpless smile before taking his hands into his — hands that have killed and saved, hurt and protected — and bringing them to his mouth. Planting a kiss there. “I’m saying that this life is already hard enough. How about we do what we have to do to get through those two and a half years, and figure out how to exist independently later?”

Chuuya watches him trail his mouth along their intertwined fingers with a sluggish, self-indulgent light in his eyes that glows even brighter once Dazai reaches his biceps and the space between them grows smaller. Then, at last, his mouth curves into something childish and playful. “You need me, too?”

“Like a beating heart.”

Chuuya lowers his palm to Dazai's chest, the place where he resides. "But you don't. Not anymore."

"Because I have you now."

"That's so…" Instead of finishing his sentence, Chuuya buries his face in Dazai's shoulder, his warm breath ghosting over his skin.

Dazai slides his arms around his waist and nudges his forehead with his nose. "Romantic?"

"Corny," Chuuya mumbles.

Dazai snorts out a soundless laugh. Leave it to Chuuya to be embarrassed by an admission that he asked to hear. "Doesn't make it any less true."

He has always needed more than just himself to stay alive. For a long time, he believed that escaping the Port Mafia would do it only to realize that the world outside this tower wasn't any less gray. He could run anywhere and never manage to get rid of that leaching color. After meeting Dostoevsky, it was finding the Book. It was a spark of curiosity. And once he found out what was on the other side, it was about keeping this world safe. Sometimes he wavered still, and he had to latch onto different obsessions that could be as tiny as the chorus of a pleasant song or as grand as plotting the recruitment of one Nakahara Chuuya.

Dazai has always needed something bigger than him, and here he is, dead yet lying in bed with the only person who has ever managed to not only make him endure but want something.

Chuuya grunts something that could either be agreement or defiance, and hooks a leg around his hip, pressing them so close together that the lines where one begins and the other ends blur. Judging by the sound of his even breaths, Dazai assumes that he has fallen back asleep. But not quite. Not yet.

"Alright," Chuuya eventually whispers.

Alright.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: explicit sexual content all over the chapter lol

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I drew inspiration from dead apple for the ability creatures hehe (I needed a way to kill them)..... anyways, hope you enjoyed this chapter! I guess we've almost reached the finish line, huh.

Chapter 50: No Such Thing as a Happy Ending

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Say something.”

“What am I supposed to say?” Leaning back, Chuuya carelessly tosses the folder onto the desk. It lands with a harsh slap. “You went ahead and joined the damn enemy. Congratulations. Good job.”

The way Dazai raises his brow oozes with an unmistakable sense of cynicism. It’s provoking, and it is goddamn infuriating. “You need an inside man. I gave you one.”

“I never said that I want *you* to be that inside man,” Chuuya snaps back. “And you know that.”

“We also both know that I’m the best choice. They can’t hurt me. You don’t have to sacrifice anyone else. It’s optimal.”

“That’s not the point!”

“What *is* the point?”

Chuuya jumps to his feet, slamming his fists down on the desk. “It’s you, making this choice by yourself. *Again*.” He has to pause to inhale through his nose. Dazai’s face doesn’t twitch, denying him a single inch. “You should have told me.”

“The window was small. I saw an opportunity and I took it because I knew that you would be reasonable and see that it’s a good thing once I explain it to you — which I did right after.”

“Don’t do that. Don’t act like I’m being unreasonable just ‘cause you can’t admit that you’re wrong.”

“Am I logically the best choice?”

“That’s not —“

“Am I logically the best choice or not?”

“Yes. Yes, you are. That doesn’t fucking change anything!”

“It does! It changes everything because you’re not angry that I joined them —“ Dazai scrunches up his face, then releases it as though he is dealing with a fucking toddler who is too irrational to follow his logic. “You’re a good boss, Chuuya; you would have sent me yourself. You’re angry *because* you’re so upset. Because you hate making this choice and I get it, I do.” Dazai steps closer. Lowers his hand on top of Chuuya’s without breaking the searing eye contact. “So you don’t have to. I’m making it for you, and all you have to do is let me.”

This fucking bastard…

His audacity is so brazen that Chuuya can’t help but laugh, the red in his veins turning to black when he snatches his arm from Dazai and kicks his whole desk, with all its contents, away from him. It only passes through Dazai but it does wipe that smug confidence off his stupid face, if only for a fleeting moment.

“You’re right,” he shouts, spreading his arms. “I am angry that sending your bitch ass anywhere still gets me so fucking worked up. Do you know why? Because you’re dead, Dazai. You’re a dead man that is nothing but a ghost and as much as you love to pretend that it doesn’t fucking affect you that you can’t taste or smell anything and that it makes you feel even less human than before, I know a liar when I fucking see one.” He is close enough now to stab a finger into Dazai’s ghostly chest. “I’m fucking angry because the last time you made that kind of choice for me, you jumped off this damn building.” His lips spiral into a sardonic sneer. “Forgive me for being *upset*.”

It always comes down to one of these two things: the fact that Dazai roped Chuuya into being the boss only to sit back and watch the spectacle unfold, and the fact that Dazai died. Usually, it’s a combination of both.

This time, it’s that Dazai went ahead to join Takasekai, the organization that has been causing the Port Mafia a lot of grief lately without telling Chuuya first.

Dazai looks back at him for several breaths that vibrate with restless irritation before he ever so softly grasps Chuuya’s rigid fist. “I can’t die twice. It’s not the same.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I’m a ghost. What could possibly happen to me?”

“Takasekai is in possession of technology that we’ve never even seen

before. You don't know what they can and can't do. Don't you think they know about people like you when we've been dealing with ghosts and conscious abilities for over two years now?"

"I'm clever," Dazai says like he really needs the damn reminder.

"I'm aware of that," Chuuya mutters, pulling his fingers away, pulling *himself* away. "You think you're so damn smart that you're invincible when you're not."

Worse even, Dazai knows that he isn't invincible but sometimes he pretends that he doesn't just to feel the thrill of being at risk. Of being human.

Chuuya scrubs a hand over his face. Pushes out a sigh. But the tension sits too deep in his bones to be expelled so easily. "I don't want to suffocate you," he admits.

He has been needy. Dazai has been back for more than two years now and Chuuya still wakes up in the middle of the night, convinced that that time has been nothing but a drug-induced delusion. Sure, Dazai reassures him that he understands, every single time, but even he doesn't have the patience of a saint. He must be as sick of Chuuya as Chuuya is sick of himself.

But he stops caring about dignity and pride the moment Dazai's actual safety is in question.

"You're not," Dazai's faster to tell him as though the assumption is offensive. "You're not suffocating me."

"Really?" Chuuya spins back to him with a scoff. "'cause you seem awfully eager to go undercover for several weeks or months. That's a long fucking time, Dazai."

"I will be here every night. Or day. Whenever I can. I'm not doing this to get away from you; I'm doing this…"

Chuuya shakes his head. "Doing this for what?"

"You have to deal with those people because I made you the boss. The least I can do is help you get rid of them."

"I didn't ask you to."

"I know."

“So don’t do it.” Except that Chuuya’s voice takes on a helpless edge of frustration because he *knows* — god, he knows that there isn’t anything that would satisfy him completely. No matter what choice Dazai makes, whether he goes against Chuuya’s orders or listens to them, Chuuya always ends up feeling like an incompetent child with a pacifier.

It’s this place. The Port Mafia. The choices it demands them to make. They can try as hard as they can to bend the rules to their will and make it more tolerable, but you can’t turn night into dusk when it’s not time yet. It’s impossible. Running a criminal syndicate and being a functioning human being are two things that cannot exist at the same time.

These days, Chuuya’s mood only ever comes in extremes; either he is on top of the world, filled with an ecstasy that not even the drug can rival, or he is at the bottom of the barrel, letting Dazai drag him around like a feral dog that’s too starved to bark anymore. This is no different. Either he is crawling into Dazai’s skin because he can’t stomach the love that he has for him, or his hands are around Dazai’s throat, shaking him until his anger evaporates into a sickening numbness that settles over the whole world.

Dazai can listen to him or not, it won’t change a thing because the only thing that could is an unyielding rod in the past.

“Come here,” Dazai says then and opens his arms in invitation, but Chuuya takes a step back instead. He is too wound up to accept anything tender right now. He needs Dazai to reach inside his chest and claw his heart out. He needs to scream. He needs a release, not this shit.

Perhaps that is exactly why Dazai ignores his low noise of protest and drags him against his chest anyway. Chuuya can squirm and push and *fight;* give that corrosive energy an outlet.

“Get away from me.” Dazai’s clutch around him tightens in response. “You piece of shit, I said —“ Chuuya shoves him away, hard, making him stumble, but only a little, not enough. “I said get away from me. *God*. I hate you.”

“You don’t,” Dazai says, eyes bright with provocation.

“I do,” Chuuya retorts and pushes him again. Harder.

“You love me.”

“I can do both.”

“You love me too much. That’s your problem.” Dazai summons the most gloating grin in his repertoire onto his face. “You don’t hate me. Not one bit.”

“Because you know me so much better than I know myself, yeah?”

“Yes.”

Chuuya grits his teeth as he takes one more step toward the bastard. He has to lift his face to glare at him and that makes it so much more aggravating, especially when Dazai’s amusement only swells with each heated beat of silence. “You don’t.”

“I do. I see all of you, even the parts that you don’t want to admit to yourself.”

Chuuya takes one more shuddering breath, then he reaches back with his fist and aims for Dazai’s marbled smirk, hoping to shatter it. Let him see *this* coming.

To his utter dismay, Dazai does see it coming, side-stepping him like it’s a dance and he is merely following their choreography. But the thing about partnerships is that it’s a two-man job; Chuuya knows him just as intimately.

Dazai can only evade his strikes for so long. The moment Chuuya predicts another feint from him, he grabs the momentum with fangs and claws and sends Dazai flying across the room with a kick to his stomach before throwing himself at him, too. Chuuya’s fingers curl in the collar of his shirt, tight as rope. His anger begs for release. And Dazai smiles up at him like he is the one who won.

“I hate you,” Chuuya hisses, only for his expression to crack a second later. “Hate me back.”

Dazai’s hand is bruisingly kind when it grasps his fist. “Will that make you feel better?”

“Yes.” Chuuya’s mouth twists around the truth. It will only feel good for a thrilling heartbeat before he remembers that it would be another appeasement, that Dazai would hate him because Chuuya asked him to. Just like he is still here because of Chuuya. All Dazai does is nurse Chuuya’s wounds and it fulfills him as much as it breaks him. “No. I don’t know what can make me feel better.”

Dazai makes a soft sound of understanding as he threads his fingers through Chuuya's hair before twisting them into a merciless fist and yanking him down into a kiss.

His mouth on him is hard and demanding, denying him any chance of oxygen until Chuuya's thoughts spin in circles in his head and finally, finally the tension starts to bleed into heady compliance. Somehow, they end up on their feet, bodies still intertwined. Their surroundings move but all Chuuya feels, all he hears and smells and tastes, is Dazai.

Then there are arms sliding around his waist, picking him up and they're so patient that Chuuya bites Dazai's lip, drawing blood, denying his kindness. Maybe they know each other so well that Chuuya anticipates Dazai retaliating by pushing him down on the coffee table because he makes the two of them heavier even before the fall. Heavy enough to shatter the glass when his body comes down on it.

Chuuya gasps against Dazai's mouth as a hundred tiny shards of sharp glass pierce his skin. He doesn't allow Dazai to pull him out of the carnage. Doesn't allow him to pull away at all even, not until Chuuya's coming around him, matching sensations of burning pain and release pulsing through him in waves.

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"I love you," Dazai says later in the bathroom, picking the fragments out of his body as Chuuya sits naked on the edge of the bathtub, "but sometimes I wonder if that's enough."

Chuuya exhales a worn-out sigh. "What else is there?"

"Ownership."

"Fuck you. Calling me your dog has gotten old a long time ago."

Dazai's silence stings more than the glass eating its way through his flesh. Every nerve ending in Chuuya's body strains against this accusation. He is his own fucking person. He doesn't need anybody to contain himself. Except that Dazai died and Chuuya practically ran to follow him. Except it's not that easy either. Dazai died after leaving him this empire of blood to run, after forcing him to love him, and worst of all, after forcing Chuuya to *need* him like a pair of lungs first.

So he can't deny it. Not without lying. And he is so sick of lying.

“You love controlling everything else,” he says, the words coming out as a confused laugh.

“Not you.”

“Why not?”

“I’m used to it. It’s a hard habit to unlearn. That doesn’t make me love doing it, especially to you.”

No matter what Dazai does, no matter what he says, it will never hold the perfect solution to the problem that possesses Chuuya. As long as they are here, they will have this fight over and over in a thousand different variations.

The thought is draining, weighing him down until he has to lean his forehead against Dazai’s torso. It’s so still. Somewhere on the floor, he hears the relentless buzzing of his phone. “I’m tired.”

On the few rare occasions, he confessed to this in the past, Dazai’s answer was always, “So let’s leave.”

Chuuya never accepted that offer. The opposite. He got angry and that led to another fight and eventually, Dazai learned that it was not the right thing to say, even if it is the reasonable thing to suggest. The Port Mafia is not a place for very reasonable people, though.

Instead, Dazai runs his fingers through his hair and cups the back of his neck. “Six more months.”

“How much punishment is enough?” Dazai asked him the first time Chuuya refused to leave this job he hates so feverishly, and back then, Chuuya didn’t have an answer, he only had the desperate need to give back everything he had taken.

Over time, he realized that he had known the answer to this question all along.

Three years.

Now only six months.

That’s the price for the blood on his hands from the Sheep, from the civilians that died when he annihilated the Bishop’s Staff, and for every other Port Mafia member that he will inevitably send to their death in the future.

Three years in hell with Dazai by his side and then…

Then he can figure out what to do with the remnants of his soul.

“I love you, too,” Chuuya tells him as Dazai’s thumb strokes up and down over his pulse point. “It’s enough.”

Dazai’s finger stills. “Not always.”

And he is right. Sometimes love feels too generous when all he needs is to be contained. But at the end of the day, even having this tired argument is a privilege, so —

“It’s enough even when it isn’t.”

Eventually, once he’s wrapped up in bandages and back in his office, Chuuya has no more excuses to ignore the persistent buzzing of his phone. The hundred different variations of SOS make him scowl. “Hey, can you turn on the TV?”

Dazai’s brows furrow ever so slightly but he grabs the remote without asking any further questions.

The screen shows an aerial view of sand dunes that are hauntingly familiar.

“— in Tottori, where the city is in a state of alarm and disbelief as a mysterious rift has appeared out of nowhere. What you see behind me has left experts struggling for answers, wondering whether this is yet another terrorist attack or the result of an experiment gone wrong.”

Chuuya blinks as the footage cuts to a man in a lab coat, gesticulating wildly while speaking. “This is unlike anything we’ve ever seen before. The rift’s energy signatures a disruption in the fabric of reality itself. We fear this isn’t merely a simple anomaly. It’s showing signs of exponential growth, which could lead to catastrophic consequences such as disruptions in space, time, and the very laws of nature.”

The reporter from before comes back on the screen. “Local authorities have been quick to establish evacuation protocols as the rift’s surroundings grow increasingly unstable. Reports of unexplained phenomena are flooding in, from sudden temperature changes to bizarre fluctuations in gravity. It’s a race against —“

“What the hell,” Chuuya mutters.

“That’s not hell. That’s the Book.”

His gaze snaps to Dazai.

Dazai meets his eyes with an unnervingly calm demeanor, almost as if he had been waiting for this to happen. “It started in the Tottori sand dunes. With the way things have been going this was bound to happen eventually.”

Dostoevsky is dead and as far as they are aware, he never publicized his knowledge regarding the Book. Technically, that only leaves the two of them, but the reality is never as simple as that. The group they have been dealing with lately, Takasekai, has been after the Book, too. So have others. It’s not impossible that others out there may be aware of the truth behind it.

“So this is what happens when too many people find out?” Transfixed, Chuuya stares at the TV screen. A numbness slowly eats its way down the length of his spine; a numbness that doesn’t come from broken glass.

Dazai touches his waist. Then his face, coaxing him back into his body of flesh and bones until Chuuya blinks and looks back at him. Dazai’s eyes are narrowed. He can tell. He can always tell.

“What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that it’s some kind of fucked up singularity,” Chuuya says slowly, “right?”

The gears in Dazai’s mind turn. Chuuya sees the second he follows his train of thought. Frankly, he is surprised Dazai didn’t think of it sooner — maybe because he didn’t want to think of it sooner.

Chuuya takes a breath. Then he lets it out. “I’m thinking that only a singularity can stop another one.”

“Corruption,” Dazai guesses a moment later. “You want to close the rift with the help of a black hole.”

A nod.

Chuuya waits for his reaction, the refusal, the anger — anything, really, but Dazai’s expression remains terribly still. Somehow, that’s worse.

“Good thing we have several doses of the drug left, hm?”

Taking the drug that gives him control over corruption — the ones the laboratory forced into him, and the ones that Verlaine used to depend on back in the day — isn’t something he ever wished to do again. What he wants and what he needs to do are two different things, though. It only took a few months of leading the Port Mafia before Chuuya ordered Dazai to unearth the location of the drug — anyone who knew how to make it — and bring it to him. Just in case Chuuya would ever need it again. A safety precaution.

Well, that day has come.

“Yeah, good thing,” Chuuya says, too aware of what the prospect of taking the drug again entails to feel any relief over it. According to Dazai, he barely made it through the withdrawal last time. He is not sure whether he will manage that again. That is if he even survives going against a damn *rift in the universe.* The odds are stacked against him.

Yet what other choice is there?

Accept defeat? Sit back and let the world implode without even trying to do anything? That’s not an option.

Rationally, Chuuya knows he’s doing the right thing, but seeing Dazai accept his decision in stoic silence — he can’t help but feel like that day has come back to haunt them. Dazai died to avoid *this.* He jumped off a 33-story building to stop the universe from crumbling in on itself. And here they are again, trapped in a vicious cycle of repeating the same mistakes over and over.

Chuuya turns away to summon his people into the office. Keeping Dazai from all of the Flags was an almost possible feat, so eventually, one by one, they learned of his secret, which is why Dazai stays glued to the back of the couch, arms crossed and filling the room with negative energy, even as people begin to trickle in.

“What the hell happened here?” Albatross asks, surveying the shattered coffee table and the ruins of his desk.

“I believe this is what they call a lover’s spat,” Lippmann murmurs under his breath despite the grim expression on his face.

“Nothing happened. Just… a minor disagreement. Whatever.” He doesn’t pay much attention to either of them as he waits for Piano

Man to join the discussion. He is the only other person who is as intimately familiar with the web of power that spans across the Port Mafia as Chuuya and Dazai, maybe even more so after leading the intelligence department for so long.

It came as a surprise to Chuuya, though it shouldn't have, to hear that Piano Man was interested in the position that will open up once his three years expire. It makes sense. Piano Man rose through the ranks quickly but not too quickly to suspect any foul play. He has friends in high places, Chuuya being one of them. He has an entire network of spies and valuable connections. He possesses secrets that are more expensive than red diamonds. And unlike Kouyou, he doesn't mind coming out of the shadows to lead.

Well, it makes sense *now.* Chuuya was skeptical at first, worried that Piano Man was only doing it for him or that Dazai had secretly encouraged him to take the job — wouldn't be the first time, after all. The more he observed Piano Man work, the clearer the picture became though.

Once the six months are up, he will make a fine boss, Chuuya thinks as Piano Man lays out the situation, which is as, if not even more, dire as the TV report. Whatever that drift is, it's expanding rapidly. Experts believe that they have a *day,* at best, before the size of that thing causes irreversible damage to —

To, well, everything.

Chuuya listens, nods when it's necessary, thanks Piano Man for his work, and then he takes a breath and raises his ass off his desk to lay out his solution instead. They get access to the location from the authorities, Chuuya takes the drugs, and Chuuya closes that thing with the help of a black hole. Short and simple.

The silence in the office once he is finished isn't very inspiring. But Chuuya expected that.

"Are you sure about this?" Piano Man asks, arms crossed tightly over his chest.

Chuuya's gaze slides to the side where Dazai is leaning against the couch. He expects Dazai to deny him and blinks when Dazai meets his eyes and nods, the bob of his head so small yet tremendously meaningful.

"I'm sure."

***

It takes only three hours to arrange a flight, come to an agreement with various government agencies, and say his goodbyes. Then Chuuya is sitting on a PM jet en route to Tottori, trying to work out whether Dazai's unbroken silence is a punishment, a coping mechanism, or something else. He stood by Chuuya earlier. It wasn't even a question of whether he would come along now. But he did all of it quietly, so fucking quietly, and Chuuya's endurance only lasts for so long.

"You've been quiet."

The look that Dazai slides his way makes every muscle in his body tense in alert.

"You don't like it. Say it," Chuuya demands. If Dazai has the gall to disagree with the plan after what he put Chuuya through, he should have the guts to admit it.

"I don't like it," Dazai says but his tone isn't hard or even accusatory. Just muted. "Happy?"

Chuuya's anger evaporates, leaving him numb and deflated instead. "No. No, I'm not happy, but you know why I'm doing it, right? I have to."

"You think you have to."

"I don't just *think*. This isn't something that scientists can fix because it's not science. It's the Book and it's fucked up logic. I have to do it. It's the only way."

Dazai lets him speak, he listens, yet the understanding that Chuuya sees in his eyes doesn't translate into his words. "Verlaine could have been another way."

"No. That's not —" Chuuya shakes his head, feeling the veins under his skin twitch in agitation. "Verlaine already gave too much. He retired."

Dazai's logic rarely is wrong but it is now. Asking someone to give up the life that they built for a shot at saving this wretched world is so unreasonable that it doesn't count as a choice.

"In six months, you'd have retired, too," Dazai tells him and his mouth

twists into a wounded smile that splits him down in the middle. “Six months, Chuuya. That’s all you have left. And I know that you think that you have to do it. I also know that even if we had a thousand different options, you’d still do it because that’s what you do. You feel like you need to make this colossal self-sacrifice so you can finally forgive yourself for the things you’ve done. I understand. I do. And I hate you for it as much as I love you for it, so *yes*, I’ve been quiet.” He parts his lips, then closes them helplessly again as though Dazai Osamu, the man with the silver tongue, has truly run out of things to utter. “I don’t know what to say.”

Chuuya’s vision flickers. He swallows, his throat paper-dry, before meeting Dazai’s eyes again except this time he isn’t giving him an order but begging him for absolution. “You always know what to say.”

He needs to hear that he is doing the right thing, that it will be okay, that this is just another day in their lives and not the end because if it *is* the end, Chuuya would prefer to die knowing that someone had faith in him than knowing that the one person who matters most resented him in their final moments.

Something in Dazai shifts. Not the muted resignation — no, that is as glaring as ever, even when he lifts his hands to Chuuya’s face — but one last declaration of priorities. “I believe in you. You’re the strongest person I know — and I don’t mean just physically. If anyone can fight a tear in the universe and come back a victor, it’s you.” Dazai nods without releasing his gaze, so slowly and thoroughly it’s as though he intends to sear his speech into his bones. “I believe in you, Nakahara Chuuya.”

Chuuya mirrors him, bobs his head, and forces himself to breathe. It’s what he asked Dazai to do. It’s what he needs. He holds out right up until the moment Dazai presses his lips to his and then it hits him. What Dazai was looking for so desperately the day Dostoevsky summoned him to the roof. What Chuuya denied him. It doesn’t matter who was right and who was wrong. That was never the point. It’s this —

This final gesture of comfort and reassurance.

The realization rattles him, makes him grasp at Dazai and bury his salt-slick face in his shoulder. “I’m sorry if I — the vineyard —“

“Don’t be,” Dazai cuts in mercifully, smoothing his thumbs down his cheeks, wet with salt. “We’ve had time, you and I, and it wasn’t

always perfect but it was enough, right? That's what you said?"

Chuuya gives him a thousand tiny nods because, yes, yes, even misery can feel like hysterical joy when he shares it with Dazai.

"Five minutes, boss," the pilot's voice announces over the speakers.

Chuuya glances up, then back at Dazai. They're approaching the site of the rift in Tottori and there won't be a landing. Not for Chuuya. It's time.

He rises to his feet, straightens his spine, and watches Dazai open the exit door of the plane in a daze. Not even the cold rush that sweeps through the cabin and sends his hair cascading behind him is enough to drag him out of the muted trance he has fallen into. Not until Dazai cups his cheek and makes him look at him.

"If this is where you die, I'm ready to die with you," Dazai shouts at him over the noise, "but I don't believe that it is. Our story will not end in a place like this. You and I are destined to have an epilogue, some sort of peaceful conclusion. Not *this*. That's not a very satisfying finale!"

They're standing at the edge of the world and Dazai is still going on about books and fate. It's so absurd that Chuuya laughs, the sound instantly carried away by the wind. It feels right. He wouldn't have it any other way. "I'm ready."

He doesn't glance down even though he knows what it is that Dazai takes out of his pocket. An injection. A goodbye. A confession. This day is filled with reminders of their past mistakes. But despite the similarities, the differences are louder.

This time, the kiss they share isn't tainted by hurt and anger. This time, Chuuya anticipates the sting of the needle even if it doesn't lessen the sickening twist of his stomach as the drug overruns his system. But most importantly, unlike Chuuya back then, Dazai believes in him.

He sees it in Dazai's eyes, his devotion and faith in him crystal-clear, just like everything else all of a sudden. The heat of corruption pumps through his blood, igniting him piece by boiling piece. He knows what to do and how to do it. Knows that he is strong enough. Knows that nothing will stop him.

Then Chuuya backs away and takes the plunge.

***

In a certain graveyard in Yokohama, an abundance of crimson-red roses with thorns surround two certain gravestones.

One says, O. DAZAI and the other C. NAKAHARA.

Two names.

Two legacies.

Two graves.

The service is beautiful. A fascinating number of Port Mafia people are in attendance, paying their respect and giving Chuuya their last wishes. A priest chants sutras. People leave expensive bouquets of flowers, then huddle by huddle, they vanish until only a distinct set of faces remain.

Yuan glances up from the grave when Dazai comes out of the shadows, watching him kneel down to add a single lily of the valley to the rest. “So, what now?”

What now? A good question that is hard to answer.

“Life, I guess.”

“Life, he says,” Albatross parrots and claps him on the back as he sidles up to them. “Weren’t you the one going on and on about some kind of farm in the countryside?”

Dazai wrinkles his nose. “A vineyard, not a farm.”

“Sounds the same to me, cowboy.”

“It isn’t, darling,” Lippmann chimes in, glancing at Albatross like an exasperated teacher looks at their students before he catches Dazai’s eye. “Have you looked at the estates that I sent you? You’ll have to give me an answer soon if you want to get your hands on anything this season.”

There is a pile of papers withering away in the office with options for vineyards and lands. The reminder makes Dazai wince on the inside and rub the back of his head on the outside. Starting a life in a vineyard is much more romantic in theory, he can tell you that. The reality is a lot more tiresome.

“I need to talk to Chuuya first or he’ll kill me.”

“Speaking of, how is he?” Piano Man, the new Port Mafia boss, asks.

Dazai’s gaze flickers to the side where his empty coffin lies, then back to the group of people. “He’s sleeping it off.”

Shirase frowns. “He hasn’t woken up at all yet?”

No one answers.

“He will,” Dazai says with a sigh when the silence grows too unbearable. Chuuya will wake up. He always does.

***

Tucked away in a private room, in a private clinic on the edge of the city, Nakahara Chuuya sleeps.

Dazai sits by the side of his bed and watches the steady fall and rise of his chest.

Using corruption to close the rift didn’t kill him but it must have taken an inhuman amount of strength. Dazai found him passed out afterward. Chuuya didn’t die. He could have though. And as Dazai waited for Doc’s team to arrive, the perfect plan to make it out of the Port Mafia started to unravel in his mind. It was half a year too soon but what did that matter? They wouldn’t get another opportunity like this again.

So Dazai stole the Port Mafia boss, spirited him away somewhere safe and private, informed the Flags and Chuuya’s closest friends of the scheme, got their approval, and then watched it unfold. The news spread like wildfire. The funeral arrangements were made just as urgently. A new boss was appointed. An old one was buried. All in the span of four days.

And Chuuya’s still sleeping.

Dazai can’t blame him. His body, his mind, everything inside of him must be tired beyond reason. He deserves all the rest he can get. Dazai understands, and he believes. He knows that this isn’t the end yet but only the beginning.

Even as he takes Chuuya’s limp hand, cradles it against his face and doubts crawl up the length of his spine like spiders, he continues to

believe.

Chuuya will wake up.

***

“Hey, dude. Hope you’re alright in there… wherever you are. I just wanted to say that I’m… I’m s— you know what? Fuck that. I’m not gonna apologize to you for anything. You enjoy your princess nap and we’ll talk once you wake up, alright? Alright. See ya soon, you cockroach.”

***

“Good morning, dear. I’m dropping by to let you know that if you don’t wake up soon, your ghost partner will end up purchasing the most dreadfully unsuitable property imaginable. You won’t like it all and that will compel me to embark on the pursuit once more — something I would rather avoid. So please be so kind as to return to the land of the living. Many thanks.”

***

“The Port Mafia’s doing fine. We took care of Takasekai thanks to the intel that you ordered a while ago. Thanks to *you*. I think we should drink to that sometime, you and I.”

***

“The pets are doing alright. Yuan and I have been looking after them ‘cause Dazai’s… well, Dazai’s here, waiting for you to come back, and that doesn’t leave him much time to take care of the pets. It’s concerning, to be honest. I’m concerned. I’ve got no idea what ghosts need to do to keep themselves alive but Dazai’s not getting enough of it. Alright, sorry, for all the bad news. That’s probably not very nice to hear when you can’t do anything about it, eh? I’m fine, tho’. Yuan’s… fine. She obviously misses you, and she left the Port Mafia now that you’re… y’know. So it’s rough, but we’re hanging in there. You hang in there too, buddy. I miss your stupid face.”

***

“You know, I actually started to believe that was it. That we had already gone through all the bad shit that someone could possibly go through — stupid, yeah, I know, but it just doesn’t seem fair. It’s not fair that you’re lying here in this bed while the world continues to

turn — a world that is still turning only because of you. It's not fair, and I just —

I refuse to accept that for you, so you wake up, Chuuya. Wake up. Just wake up. If not for yourself, do it for your fucking boyfriend before he vanishes out of existence because you weren't there to keep him here. *Wake up*."

***

It happens on a gloomy, gray afternoon. Dazai's stretching Chuuya's legs to keep his muscles at least somewhat active when a flash of movement catches his attention.

A tiny twitch in Chuuya's fingers.

Dazai goes stock-still but keeps his expectations on a tight leash. He has seen Chuuya jerk a few times without anything changing. Doc says it's normal.

Then Chuuya's eyelids flutter, though, and Dazai knows it's not just an insignificant shudder. It's everything. It's Chuuya waking up.

Gently letting go of his shin, Dazai moves to his side, running a careful hand through that bright hair. "It's alright, sweetheart. You can come back now. Just follow the sound of my voice, yeah??"

Chuuya's eyes slip open and shut several times before they flicker to Dazai, taking him in. He moves his mouth but only a soft rasp comes out. After another couple of attempts, he manages a weak, "Hey."

"Hello," Dazai whispers back, squeezing his hand between his fingers, a thousand urgent confessions rising to the surface. "There you are. You have no idea how happy I am to see you."

Chuuya's lips form a faint smile, and it's so beautiful, so powerful that Dazai's mind short-circuits. *"You should marry me."*

Chuuya blinks, dazed. Dazai can't tell whether he is still too disorientated to process the words, or whether the words are disorienting. Dazai can't tell what he would prefer either. It's a stupid thing to say to someone who has just come out of a coma. There is a right time and place for marriage proposals and this, unfortunately, was the opposite of that. But the questionable timing aside, Dazai means it with his entire dead heart. It might have been the most honest thing he has ever said.

“Um…” There is a long pause before Chuuya musters a small shake of his head. “What?” Then his gaze flickers past Dazai and his frown grows even more confused. “Where are we?”

“A private clinic,” Dazai tells him and finally, allows himself to take a seat on the chair, though he doesn’t let go of Chuuya’s hands. They are warm. “Do you remember what happened?”

Chuuya makes a noise of contemplation, squinting at something in the distance. Then he finds Dazai again. “The rift. I… I remember feeling like I was about to die, and suddenly there was nothing.”

Dazai nods. “You closed the thing. You saved us all.”

“Oh.” Chuuya lets that sink in for a few moments. “I didn’t die.”

“No, you didn’t.”

Furrowing his brows, Chuuya tries to sit up, fails, and only ends up scanning the room again. “How long was I out?”

At this, Dazai hesitates. Even as weak as he is right now, Chuuya doesn’t miss it, his eyes keenly pinning Dazai. “Dazai. How long?”

“Six weeks.”

“What?” A tremor runs through Chuuya’s clenched fingers. “Six — six *weeks*?”

“You closed a tear in the universe, Chuuya. Your body needed to recover.”

“But —“ Panicked, Chuuya turns to the side. He scrambles to lift his upper body and clenches his teeth when his muscles don’t cooperate with him. Dazai stands up to help him. “How’s that even possible? And what about — the Port Mafia —“

“About that,” he cuts in, steadying Chuuya with a hand on his back. “There’s something else you should know.”

It takes a lot of nerve to meet his bright, blue eyes as they stare at him, demanding answers.

“The Port Mafia thinks you’re dead.”

Silence.

“They buried you five weeks ago.”

Silence.

“I know you still had six months left, but I saw an opportunity and I took it.”

At last, Chuuya blinks and looks away from him, scrubbing a hand across his face. The air in the room prickles with tension. “I’m no longer the boss?”

“No.”

Dazai waits, each second more unbearable than the last until finally…

Chuuya’s whole body sags with a sigh that borders on relief.

It confuses Dazai as much as it astonishes him, the volatile mix of emotions coaxing him to sit down at the edge of the bed before he passes out as well. Alright, he is not sure whether that’s even possible as a ghost but he isn’t interested in finding out. “You’re not mad?”

“No,” Chuuya murmurs and lifts his head to him. His face contorts a little. “I mean, I should be. You took away my decision. Again.”

Dazai cracks a guilty smile.

“But I only had six months left anyway… it doesn’t make that much of a difference.” Releasing another heavy sigh, he lets himself slump against Dazai. “Besides, what else could you have done when I wasn’t waking up?”

“Well, technically, I, uh, made that decision on day one…”

Chuuya stiffens, but only for a moment. “You could have just kept that shit to yourself, asshole.”

“I don’t want to start our whole future on a lie, Chuuya. That’d be bad luck.”

Chuuya’s huff is quiet and forgiving. For a few moments, he only looks at Dazai and it feels like the end — not their end, just the end of the conversation and maybe the end of this chapter, too. Chuuya is awake. The Port Mafia is behind them. All is well.

Then Chuuya tilts his head to the side with an uncertain squint. “Did you tell me to… marry you earlier, or was that a weird dream I had?”

Dazai exhales something akin to a chuckle, scratching the back of his head. “Depends. Are you going to say yes if it was the former?”

“You never asked me a question.”

“Hm?”

“You told me to marry you. You didn’t ask me.”

Ah.

Twisting his body around, Dazai brings a hand to Chuuya’s cheek, cupping it softly but firmly as he looks into Chuuya’s eyes. “Chuuya, will you do me the honor of marrying me?”

There is a beat of silence. And another one. Neither Dazai’s grin, nor Chuuya’s dry, worn-out expression falters.

“Yeah,” Chuuya says, at last. “Okay.”

“Yeah?”

“What, you want me to say it twice?” Chuuya’s eyes flick to the ceiling in exasperation but his face leans into Dazai’s palm. “Yeah, I’ll marry you, dumbass. I don’t know how, considering we’re both officially dead but —“

His speech turns into a muffled sound of surprise and relief when Dazai kisses him. It’s short, Chuuya’s lips slow and out of practice as they move against Dazai’s, though it’s not any less sweet. No, it’s the sweetest thing in the world.

Chuuya’s breathing hard and clutching at his shoulder when they break apart. It will take his body a while to adjust. Doc told him as much.

“How are you feeling?” Dazai asks anyway as he slides his arms around Chuuya’s waist and pulls him close against his chest, smiling because, for once, Chuuya goes willingly.

“Tired as shit.”

“I can imagine.”

“Doesn’t make sense,” he grumbles. “I slept for five weeks. Why the hell am I still tired?”

“You were in a coma. Everyone who wakes up from a coma wakes up exhausted. I’ll call Doc and he’ll make sure that everything else is okay.”

Chuuya is awake but the wedding will have to wait a few more months. The tubes that have been feeding and hydrating him need to come out first, and his team of doctors needs to check his neurological and physical health — his memories seem to be intact for now, at least. He will probably have to do physical therapy, which, knowing Chuuya, will be a nightmare. It’s a long way to go and Dazai will savor every terrible minute of it.

“Five minutes,” Chuuya whispers. “Do that in five minutes.”

***

“You can still change your mind, you know. We can still run.”

Chuuya looks at Yuan’s reflection in the vanity mirror, barely able to stifle the grin that threatens to erupt at those words. He has heard them before on a day that now seems to have happened a lifetime ago when it has been what? Three years? Something like that. “I’d prefer not to get haunted by a ghost for the rest of my life.”

Gathering his hair into a high ponytail, Yuan rolls her eyes. "I'm just saying. You’re about to marry a real asshole. Are you sure about this? Absolutely cross-your-heart-and-hope-to-die kind of sure?"

“Never been more sure.” Chuuya crosses his arms to hide the heat that crawls up his neck, too damn bright against his white tux. His feelings for Dazai are hardly a secret anymore but that doesn’t make voicing them any easier — which is why he insisted to have a small, intimate ceremony just between the two of them, an officiant, and no one else. Of course, that plan quickly went out the window when Albatross got him drunk one night, and Chuuya inadvertently let their secret slip. It’s still a relatively intimate affair, including Yuan, Shirase, the Flags, and Gin; they don’t have that many friends. The champagne glasses Dazai has been sending him all day are greatly appreciated anyway.

“Fine, I guess coming back from the dead for somebody would do that to you,” Yuan says with a sigh. “But my offer still stands. Say the word and I’ll drive the get-away car.”

Chuuya meets her gaze and gives her a wordless nod of gratitude

when Shirase waltzes into the room, wearing a black suit that looks ridiculous on him. “Did I hear the words get-away car?” Sidling up to them, he gives Chuuya’s back a few strong claps. “Already planning to make a run for it, huh? I knew you were rushing into this.”

“No one’s going anywhere, and I’m not rushing shit.”

Alright, maybe by normal standards marrying someone after only two and something years of officially being together is too fast, but their lives have never been exactly ordinary. Dazai’s a ghost, Chuuya carries a singularity with the power of a nuke inside of him, and they’re both legally dead on paper. Not waiting long enough to do this is probably the most normal thing they have ever done.

“Someone’s grumpy on his big day. Here —“ Shirase nudges another glass of champagne into Chuuya’s hand. “Dazai ordered me to give you this. Said it will keep you from losing your nerves.”

“Our little Groomzilla,” Yuan whispers, petting Chuuya’s head and making him glare even harder.

He is definitely not a Groomzilla. He just doesn’t like being sappy in public, damn it.

“It’s just a stupid wedding — that we already had before, by the way.” He still accepts Dazai’s gift, eagerly bringing it to his mouth and downing it in one go. “Dazai’s the one who will be losing his nerves. He’s the one scared of commitments, not me.”

That makes his two friends exchange a loaded glance.

“What?” Chuuya says and turns his head around to them when they refuse to elaborate. “What is it? Did he say something?”

Yuan snorts. “Oh, he’s been saying a lot of things. I don’t think I’ve ever heard so many words come out of his mouth.”

“Yeah, well, he talks a lot when he’s nervous,” Chuuya says with a frown.

So Dazai *is* nervous. Chuuya’s not sure how to feel about that, a part of him delighted because he has had to listen the bastard talk about how Chuuya would be the one to cry first for months, and another part mildly terrified because Dazai was the one to propose, so what the hell does he have to be nervous about?! Surely coming back from the dead was a greater vow than marrying someone. Besides, this is

more symbolic than anything.

“Is he also a condescending little bitch when he’s nervous?” Yuan huffs, flicking her eyes toward the ceiling. “Because I’m sick of him telling me *to do this and do that but no not like that, that’s all wrong, Chuuya doesn’t like it like that!”*

Grimacing, Shirase nods as if to say that she has a point. “He scares me, to be honest.”

And they called *Chuuya* Groomzilla, ha! They’re not exaggerating, though. Dazai has been rather *assertive* when it comes to organizing this wedding and remodeling the house, but Chuuya figured it’s just his way of showing he cares.

“He made one of the cooks cry earlier,” Yuan adds. “Lippmann and I had to bribe him to make him stay and finish the desserts, at least.”

“He threatened to dissolve me in acid simply ‘cause I asked if he didn't think Nami should be here as well.”

“He almost had a fistfight with Albatross.”

“He —“

“I get it,” Chuuya snaps, exasperated. “What do you want me to do about it? Go talk to him if he pisses you off this much.”

“But he only listens to you,” Shirase says.

“And he says he’s doing it for you.”

Rubbing his forehead, Chuuya lets out a breath before looking at his friends in the mirror. “Is he still at it?”

“Why do you think I’m here?” Shirase asks. That earns him an elbow from Yuan. “What? Chuuya doesn’t really need me here. He gets all the pep talks from you.”

Yuan rolls her eyes before pointedly saying, “Dazai is still at it, yes.”

“The ceremony’s set to begin in, like, five minutes. What the hell is there left to complain about?”

“Apparently, every single thing.”

Chuuya lets out a sigh. Then he rises to his feet.

“Where are you going?” Yuan says. “It’s not time yet — you have another —“

“I’ll be back, don’t worry,” Chuuya mutters, brushing off her concern with a flip of his hand. He just needs to do something first.

The bedroom leads out into an intimate hallway and down a staircase that creaks with each step he takes. Passing the kitchen, still undergoing some final touches, he steps into the shiny ass oxford shoes Dazai bought him and heads outside. The vineyard sits in a tiny, amphitheater-shaped valley that faces north, saturated with fields of green leafy vines that separate their two-story house from the rest of the winery. An elderly couple with no kids sold the estate to them, so it’s mostly functioning, with some old equipment that will need replacing and other general changes aside. Chuuya wonders whether that will be Dazai and him someday, too. Old, still together, childless, and in need of one final new adventure: retirement. Technically, this is their retirement, just not from life but from the underworld. Then again, their future might look entirely different. Nothing is set in stone.

He hears Dazai before he sees him.

“— has to be exactly timed — and I mean by the millisecond — or else, it will simply sound all wrong, and you will have ruined the entire ceremony, and thus, the wedding. Do you want to be known as the person who ruined someone’s wedding?”

Dressed in a matching tux, he is talking to one of the three chefs they hired for today. Why he is lecturing her about anything other than food is a mystery to Chuuya. The young woman’s red-rimmed eyes notice him first, widening ever so slightly. He nods at her. “Hey, give us a moment please.” Then he turns to Dazai, whose head whips to him at the same time. “Care to tell me what you’re doing?”

“Me? What are *you* doing? We’re not supposed to see each other before the ceremony, Chuuya. It’s bad luck.”

“We’ve already had our fair share of bad luck. I think we’ll be fine.”

“But — this isn’t —“ Dazai sputters, blinking ten times a minute, looking so frazzled by this encounter that Chuuya takes pity on him, reaching out to take his hands into his.

“Are you alright?”

Dazai finally stops trying to produce words to breathe instead. It takes him a few more moments to meet Chuuya's eyes. "Yes. Perfect. Are you?"

"Fine. Just heard you've been terrorizing people left and right. Figured I should check on you."

"You would have seen me in five minutes anyway, stupid."

"Yeah, at a damn ceremony in front of people." Chuuya pokes him in the chest but his expression has softened. Dazai's nervous, which is as cute as it is concerning. "Not like this."

"Well, I'm alright. I'm just making sure that everything's perfect, you know? Because it should be. It's what we deserve. I'm making an effort." The longer he looks at Dazai, the faster and more defensive his words become. "I care, Chuuya!"

"I can see that. You care a lot."

"I do. We're marrying. That's important."

"Yeah," he agrees with a nod. "And you know I care too, right?"

Dazai raises his brows. "You're here, so I assume you do, yes."

"I care about marrying you," Chuuya goes on, holding his gaze. "Not about the ceremony or how good the food is or any of that stuff. I'd marry you in a dump. Anywhere, really."

"Just because you would, doesn't mean you should."

He sighs. That's not the point and Dazai knows it. His petulant sigh says as much.

"Fine, I understand what you're telling me. I do."

"But?" Chuuya questions, hearing the unspoken interjection.

"But I want it to be perfect anyway." Dazai weakly lifts one shoulder. "Our circumstances aren't, so the least I can do is make sure this is."

"Our circumstances are fine," Chuuya says with an insulted frown. Sure, they're not *perfect* but they are a hell lot better than they were half a year ago.

"You *just* said that we've already got all the bad luck in the world."

“I didn’t mean it like that.”

“You didn’t even want this,” Dazai blurts out, and backs away, gesticulating wildly as his doubts rush out of him in rivers. “First, I made you the boss. Now I’m making you live here. What if you don’t want any of this? What if you want big cities and nightclubs and — and street racing? Or what if you want to go to university? There’s no university here, Chuuya. It’s just me and…” He shakes his head. “It’s just me here.”

“I don’t know what I want. That’s the *point.”* Chuuya catches his wide eyes and doesn’t let go. “I don’t know what the hell I want from this life but now I have the time to figure it out, and that’s enough, Dazai. Please get it into that thick head of yours. It’s enough.” Dazai tries to look away; tries to dismiss him but Chuuya doesn’t let him, staring at him hard enough to make his jaw muscles hurt. “I want to be here. I’m alright. You’re alright. We’re alright. It’s not perfect but it doesn’t have to be for it to be alright.”

Dazai’s silence is timid. Sheepish. He doesn’t want to stand down — and not because he’s as stubborn as Chuuya but because a part of him probably finds some fucked up kind of comfort in recycling the same worn-out arguments. Letting go is hard and unnerving, even if it’s something that has weighed you down for ages. Letting go is necessary, though.

When Dazai gives in, it’s with a sullen huff, his gaze sliding to the ground, to the side, anywhere except Chuuya. “That’s… a lot of alrights”

“Shut up,” Chuuya mutters and steps closer, knees bumping against Dazai’s before he snakes his arms around Dazai’s neck and waits for him to look at him. “Are you going to be fine?”

“I already am.” Dazai’s smile is lopsided and tinged with something sad but sincere, so Chuuya allows him to pull him closer by the waist and plant a kiss on his mouth. Allows their lips to linger, to seek more again and again even though kissing each other right before marrying each other probably breaks another hundred wedding traditions. It is right here at this moment that the thought crosses Chuuya’s mind.

“You know what?” he says after pulling away to grab Dazai’s hand. “Here.”

Dazai watches him with amused curiosity. “What are you doing?”

“Marrying you.”

It was supposed to be only the two of them from the start. Chuuya loves their friends, he does, and so does Dazai — albeit in his own way — but this marriage, this profession of love and devotion or whatever it is that people call it — was only ever meant to be theirs.

Dazai’s eyes narrow to squint at him. He never takes his hand away though.

Chuuya takes a deep breath and lifts his head to his soon-to-be-husband, his person, his partner before speaking. “I, Nakahara Chuuya, take you, Dazai Osamu, as my husband — or however the words go — and I promise to…” The tide of vows and confessions and feelings that wash over him makes him stutter to a pause. There is so much to say and Chuuya has never been the best at expressing himself. That’s Dazai’s field of expertise. All he can do is try. “I promise to give you a reason to stay.” Holding his gaze, Chuuya nods firmly. “Every day I will wake up and give you a reason to stay because there might be a life without you in it but it’s not the life I want. I want *you*. Always.”

There. It doesn’t encompass even a fraction of what Chuuya wishes he could tell him but it’s a start, and that’s what this is about, right? Marrying Dazai is one choice out of a million more to come. But it’s the choice to even *have* more.

Dazai’s throat bobs in the silence that follows, his brows furrowed into a tight frown of concentration. Chuuya is ready. It's only one choice, no more and no less significant than any of the others. Yet when Dazai opens his mouth, a shudder runs through his entire body, the realization that this is happening making the entire world tilt.

“I, Dazai Osamu, take you, Nakahara Chuuya, as my husband — ‘or however the words go’ as you so nicely put it —“ Chuuya exhales a snort, biting his lip to keep his expression composed — “and I promise to show you that life can be more than just impossible decisions and a tragic end. Even if it takes a hundred years, I will give all of them to make you see that. There is so much more than that out there for you. *You* are worth more than that.”

“So are you,” Chuuya tells him with an embarrassing sniff.

Dazai squeezes his hands. “Quiet. You’ve already had your turn.” Chuuya narrows his eyes but presses his lips shut. “And I want to be there, by your side, when you see it. I’m selfish enough to wish I was

the reason for it, but so in love with you that I will survive if it's something else that fulfills you. I just… I want to spend the rest of my long undead life trying to find it for you *and* with you."

Chuuya swallows, the smile he forces out dangerously brittle, which would be mortifying if Dazai looked any better. He doesn't. "Yeah. I — I want that too. You know I do." He intends to say these words loudly and proudly, but instead, they come out in a slurred whisper.

It's just one stupid decision, damn it. Why the hell does it feel like they are carving their initials into each other's ribs?

"I guess," Dazai's fingers tighten around him, subconsciously dragging him closer, "we are married then."

Chuuya breathes out a shaky laugh. They are married, and in the grand scheme of things, it changes nothing, but it feels like everything. It feels right, and it feels painful. Overwhelming and at the same time like relief.

He is still grinning when he tilts forward and meets Dazai in the middle. Their mouths collide with perhaps too much eagerness because it's clumsy and uncoordinated until it isn't. Chuuya's on his tiptoes, cupping the back of his husband's head while his other arm is curled around his neck, basking in the rush of dizzying joy that floods him; and each urgent press and retreat of their lips makes his chest shudder from — from — from everything, and then Chuuya's back hits the wall of something solid, and he distantly wonders whether they should skip the entire wedding.

"There you — whaaaat in the world are you doing?" And that's Albatross, Chuuya thinks as they break away from each other with heaving chests. He lets the back of his head rest against their house behind him. Neither of them turns around just yet though. "We're waiting for you! We thought — I thought you had skipped the wedding and ran off!"

Dazai shares a private smile with him and uses his thumb to brush the corner of his mouth before shooting their friend a derisive look over his shoulder. "Oh, we've just had to finish some important business with each other."

"Two minutes before your wedding?"

"That's the thing," Chuuya says, peeking out from under the arm that shields him from view. "We're already married."

Albatross, wearing a hot pink suit, slicked-back hair, and of course his sunglasses, waves him away, clearly impatient to get going. “I know that, but I wasn’t invited the first time, so it doesn’t count. Let’s go!”

“No, I mean we *just* married. Five seconds ago.”

“Indeed. Here.” Dazai holds out his hand, though to show off what exactly Chuuya doesn’t know. They didn’t exchange any rings. Yuan has them.

“What am I looking at? I don’t see anything,” Albatross murmurs, coming closer to inspect Dazai’s naked fingers. He jerks back when Dazai, the bastard, slaps him in the face. “Oi!”

Chuuya elbows Dazai, but he can’t quite help a snort from escaping. Clearing his throat, he forces himself to stay serious though. “We’re married, so we can just skip the ceremony and jump straight to getting drunk.” He glances at Dazai. “Right?”

“Sure,” Dazai says, sliding an arm around his waist.

Chuuya nods. “Now that that’s settled, let’s —“

“No!” Albatross cuts him off, wildly shaking his head. “No, you can’t do that!”

“We just did,” Chuuya says wryly.

“No, you have to get married! In front of us! Whatever you two did, it doesn’t count.”

Dazai’s body tenses against him, mirroring his own reaction. “You shut up.”

“Your birth won’t count if you don’t stop talking right now.”

Albatross turns his bewildered look to Dazai. “You were on everyone’s ass to make it perfect just an hour ago.”

“Nerves,” he replies with a dismissive shrug and flashes him a broad smirk full of disdain. As someone who has been on the receiving end of it, Chuuya can sympathize. It’s infuriating. Too bad it’s too entertaining to witness from an outsider's perspective. “I’m normal now.”

Albatross opens and closes his mouth a few times; then inhales deeply and puffs out his chest. “You’re getting married, or — or I’ll tell the

Port Mafia that you're still alive. That you both are! Hah, how would you like that?"

Chuuya's head tilts to the side only to see that Dazai's already looking at him. A wordless understanding passes through them before Dazai turns back to Albatross.

"Try it."

"Sure, go ahead."

"And while you're in Yokohama, check up on those precious bikes of yours." Dazai lets out a melodramatic sigh and automatically pulls Chuuya even closer to his side. "Would be a shame if anything happened to them."

"Fine, I'm not telling anyone," Albatross mutters, yet his determination doesn't seem to falter. "You still have to do the ceremony. Come on, it's not fair to you guys. You've gone through so much shit just to marry each other in some backyard?"

Frowning, Chuuya scans their surroundings. Not that it matters. "It's a nice backyard. It doesn't make any difference."

"Wow, two of Japan's deadliest people and they're afraid to do a silly little marriage ceremony, huh?"

That makes him share another look with Dazai.

"No one's scared here," Chuuya says, raising his chin. Skipping something merely symbolic — and something that's very uncomfortable — doesn't make them cowards. Just makes them —

"We're being smart."

Yes. They're smart.

Albatross arches his brows as though he doesn't buy their excuses. It doesn't make him right but it does make Chuuya bristle. He is not a fucking coward, damn it. Every day, he wakes up with a ruthless calamity sleeping inside of him. He spent almost three years ruling the belly of the beast that goes by the name of Port Mafia. His husband is Dazai fucking Osamu. They are not *scared*.

Huffing out an irritated breath, Chuuya grabs Dazai's hand and pulls him along. "Fine. Let's fucking do this."

“Really?” Dazai sounds surprised but not against it.

“Easier to get it over with than explaining why we’re not doing it.”

“How romantic.” Dazai’s voice suddenly fills his ear, and Chuuya can tell that he’s smiling. It’s an infectious thing. “I love you so much.”

So they marry each other a second — or depending on how you look at it — a third time.

They stand in front of the simple wooden altar that forms the backdrop for the ceremony. They let Albatross, who insisted on officiating, welcome their guests with a speech that lasts an eternity. They let him talk. And talk. And talk. Until Dazai eventually kicks him in the shin to force him to hurry up. They exchange cups of sake and vows that are not as uncensored as the ones before, though not any less sincere. Albatross gives them their offerings. They slide two identical rings onto each other’s fingers, and then Albatross declares them as husband and husband, granting them permission to kiss.

The attention is mortifying but Dazai knows him too well, covering his face with his palm as their lips collide and the excited beat of his heart drowns out the whooping of their friends. Afterward, Chuuya still ducks his head, grateful that Dazai has no issue being as loud and obnoxious as possible, lifting their joined hands into the air with an exaggerated hoot of joy.

It’s embarrassing which makes it even more memorable. Chuuya doesn’t regret letting Albatross bully them into doing this — something that he makes sure to confess to him after several glasses of champagne. It earns him a wet smack of a kiss on his forehead. It’s disgusting. He loves it.

He loves a lot of things about that day, some of which he will forget once morning comes and the copious amount of liquor he consumes over the night robs him of precious memories, and others that will live in the back of his mind for the rest of his life. More than anything else though, he loves sharing almost every second of it with Dazai. His partner, and now, his husband.

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Chuuya is drunk. In other words, he is not only loud but fiercely unapologetic about every thought that runs through his head. He also seems to be happy, though, and that stands out more than even his most daring comments.

"What on earth are you constantly scribbling about over there?"

Without looking up from his sheet of paper, Chuuya emits a soft huff under his breath and continues to frown at himself. “I told you a hundred times already. I’m working on my *list*.”

Lippmann, the person who dared to ask him the question, glances at Piano Man by his side with a bemused smile. Chuuya has, in fact, not told him a hundred times already. He did it twice and it was Albatross and Shirase who wanted to know.

Dazai takes a sip of his glass which contains a Polish spirit with enough alcohol content to kill a man. In his mouth, it tastes like watered-down sake. It’s not his favorite flavor, but it is a flavor, and it possesses the ability to give him a sensation that's as close as a ghost can come to feeling inebriation.

“Grocery list?” Lippmann jokes. “I see you’re already embracing the miracle of civilian life.”

“No, you’re —“ hiccup “— wrong.” Chuuya lifts his head to shake it vigorously, acting like the topic is a matter of life and death. “It’s my ‘out of the fucking Port Mafia’ list. Dazai —“ hiccup “— got to be a barista and spy and shit. Now it’s my turn.”

“What’s on it?”

“Things.”

“What things?”

“Let’s see.” Piano Man promptly reaches over the table to steal the list and ignores Chuuya’s offended noises of protest.

“Oi, give that back — that’s not —“

“Careful,” Dazai says and draws Chuuya back into his chair when he nearly knocks over two candles. “Let’s not burn down our home before it’s even ready.”

Chuuya leans his head against his shoulder and sniffs dramatically. “But my list. He stole it.”

“You should kill them,” Dazai sympathizes, sliding an arm around him and rubbing it reassuringly. “I’ll help you.”

Chuuya makes a muffled noise of agreement before dropping a kiss on

his knuckles.

On the other side of the table, Piano Man's brows shoot up not because he is listening in on them but because he scans the sheet of paper while Lippmann's face lights up with surprise next to him, nodding involuntarily. "These are mostly different sex locations."

"So?" Chuuya straightens his posture to lift his chin. "Maybe that's all I wanna do from now. Have lots and lots of sex. What's the problem with that?"

"Nothing wrong with that. I'm just surprised." Bringing a glass of wine to his mouth, Piano Man shrugs.

"It's a good list." Lippmann winks at Chuuya. "I can strongly attest to number nine."

"I don't need to know that," Chuuya mutters before flicking his fingers toward Piano Man. "And what do you mean surprised? The hell did you expect?"

"Nothing specific — well, I mean, you've essentially spent your whole life doing other people's bidding, right? First corruption, then taking care of the Sheep, joining the Mafia, and *leading* the Mafia. You must have had dreams while you were doing all that. Things that you wanted to do. I guess, I expected to see you doing that now that you can."

"The boy just woke up from a six-week-long coma," Doc chimes in and pauses to yawn, apparently having woken up from his nap. "Give him some time to sort out his life plans."

"You should join me on the silver screen," Lippmann tells Chuuya with a self-satisfied nod. "I could make a starlet out of you. Together, we would dominate the cinematic industry."

"No way in *hell.*"

"You're also forgetting the crucial detail that Chuuya is officially dead," Dazai points out because, apparently, all the people here have drunk away their common sense.

Lippmann presses his lips shut, taken aback by the reminder. Then his eyes widen. "You had a twin the entire time. There."

"Too risky," Piano Man says, mirroring Chuuya's glaring disapproval

though more subtly.

It's only been two months but already the dynamics of power have shifted. While Dazai has no doubt that Piano Man still cares about Chuuya, his priority now is the Port Mafia and that includes not endangering his title as the boss by allowing rumors about the previous boss to spread.

A shadow of surprise flickers across Lippmann's face when he must draw the same conclusion. He takes it in stride, though. They have all been there in one way or another. That's just the way this game works.

"Don't wanna be a damn actor anyway." Chuuya rocks his chair back and uses his ability to keep himself from toppling over even as his head lifts to the dark sky above them. "I want —" His ambitious words trail off into a heavy sigh that sounds like frustration. "I don't know what I want."

Earlier, he reassured Dazai that it was fine not to have all the answers, and Dazai trusts his word. Chuuya wouldn't lie to him to spare his feelings. Still, that doesn't mean that his frustration isn't real. It is. It simply isn't damning.

As if thinking of the same thing, Chuuya tilts sideways to glance at Dazai; a small smile softens his expression. "But I'm excited to find out, yeah?" He lets the chair slump back to the ground before grabbing Dazai's hands. "I mean, you have to find something new to do as well now, right? You're no longer my spy. You're just…you, and I'm just me, and we both have nothing but time."

Dazai brings their intertwined fingers to his mouth and places a kiss on them without breaking eye contact. "We do."

"I'll drink to that," someone says in the background. "Cheers."

Releasing a shallow breath, Chuuya nods.

"Just some advice but you should probably avoid working together, or you'll end up killing each other from getting on each other's nerves," Lippmann comments wryly, which successfully manages to capture their attention.

Chuuya snorts even as he leans into his side.

Dazai, on the other hand, makes a face. "Chuuya would never get

enough of me.” He pats his cheek. “Right?”

“Wrong.”

“Chuuya!”

“What? It’s true. You’re best enjoyed in small doses.” He rises to his feet with a full-body sigh, swaying ever so slightly. “I gotta piss. Come with me.”

That earns him a chorus of teasing chuckles.

“Chuuya gets married and suddenly he can’t go to the bathroom by himself, hm?”

“Fuck off,” Chuuya mutters, flipping his friends off without looking back at them as he drags Dazai toward the house. “Maybe I just want to fuck him without you perverts watching us the entire time.”

“You know, that was a bold statement from someone who starts to panic whenever he doesn’t see me for more than a few hours,” Dazai says, keeping his voice down so only the two of them hear.

The second Chuuya’s fingers tense around his, he winces. Not because of the pain — though Chuuya’s grip is rather firm — but because the joke might be a bit too soon.

“Wait, I take that back,” he hurries to add; he has to poke Chuuya’s face several times to make him look at him. “I’m sorry.”

Blue eyes flash at him. “You should be, asshole.”

They’re not cold, though. Just annoyed, rolling away from him.

“Not fucking funny,” Chuuya mumbles and turns his head away, squeezing his hand in punishment. “If you weren’t already dead, I’d kill you for that. Or smack you.”

“You can still smack me.”

“Yeah, but you won’t feel a thing.”

“You just have to smack me really, really hard. Maybe use your ability for some extra help.”

“Don’t need that.”

They bypass the kitchen and Dazai snatches a bottle of water from the counter that he nudges against Chuuya's chest until he takes the hint and obediently lifts it to his mouth, keeping eye contact with Dazai as he gulps half of it down in one go. Something so mundane shouldn't look so suggestive but drunk Chuuya has a gift of achieving the opposite with pretty much anything, whether it's brushing his teeth, eating leftover noodles, or staying hydrated.

"Stop looking at me like that or I'll start thinking you're in love with me."

Chuuya scoffs against his hand that wipes at his wet lips. "We're married, idiot."

"Wait, really?" Dazai clutches his chest. "I had no idea!"

"You should really start working on your humor. It's getting shittier and shittier with each day —" Chuuya cuts himself off with a triumphant, "Hah, that should be on the to-do list!"

"I thought the list was for you," Dazai says, following him into the bathroom.

"For me, for you, same damn thing — ah!" Chuuya blinks dazedly at him when Dazai pushes him against the door as soon as it's closed, but his surprise is quick to transform into a slow and heady smile that fills his eyes. Dazai suspects it has something to do with the pecks that he plants all over his face. First his chin. Then the sharp angle of his jaw. His cheekbone. His right brow. The left one. The flushed tip of his nose.

"You know that —" A breathless giggle escapes him as Dazai's lips kiss one eyelid. "That I actually need to piss… right?"

Dazai snorts against the throbbing pulse on his neck. "To be honest, no. I assumed you wanted to have a quick romp."

"Well, I wouldn't mind that either, but…" Chuuya bites his lower lip when Dazai straightens up to look down at him, arching one brow while his hands casually rest on each side of Chuuya's hips.

"But?"

"But I drank a lot over the past few hours. Like… a lot."

Dazai's lips twitch and twist into a teasing grin. "I'm aware of that,

trust me. You've just never needed my assistance to go to the bathroom before." He squints at him. "Is that a new married people thing?"

Chuuya absently toys with the collar of Dazai's button-up as he rests against the door, and just… drinks him in as shamelessly as the champagne he has been sipping all night. The spotlight would be unnerving if it wasn't for the drunken flush on his cheeks, sugar, and alcohol rendering him unusually tender. Dazai sees something deeper than mere tipsy affection, though. Chuuya seems weightless, lighter than he has been in years despite the nature of his ability.

Dazai has to grit his teeth against the overwhelming surge of feelings inside of him — something that is too big to put into human words and too delicate to keep inside himself. It makes his fingers shake when he lifts them to Chuuya's face, tracing the shape of his smile.

Chuuya leans into the touch, oblivious to the pain that ripples through Dazai. "Maybe." And then he grimaces. "Wait, no. I don't need you in the damn bathroom with me every time I go. I just… I missed you."

"You missed me?" Dazai echoes. "During our wedding?"

"Yeah. Missed being alone with you, Shitzai. 'S different when others are there."

"Ah, so you missed fondling me?"

Chuuya's answer is to squeeze his ass.

It is a gesture that speaks louder than words, so Dazai leans forward and kisses him. Only a peck, his mouth closed. But that is never the end of it with Chuuya, who swiftly snakes his arms around Dazai's neck and draws him into another one, still shockingly but savoring this time, lingering with each brush of lips. Dazai's right hand slides into his hair, the other around his waist, rubbing the spot on his lower back that always makes him purr in bed, and smiling when Chuuya sighs against him. His body is usually solid as a mountain, all firm muscle and strength, but right now, he *melts* into Dazai.

Only one or two minutes pass before Chuuya suddenly pushes him away with a hand on his chest, turning his face to the side with a pained grimace. "Oh god, I think —" He clamps a hand over his mouth, words coming out muffled. "Think I'm gonna be sick."

"And here I was thinking you liked me."

Chuuya's gaze shifts to him — and that's enough to know that he isn't exaggerating. Dazai gestures toward the toilet. "C'mon, I'll hold your hair."

"This blows," Chuuya whines even as he sinks to his knees and proceeds to let out the loudest burp Dazai has ever heard come out of him. It turns his pained grimace into a thoughtful frown as he glances up at him. "Wait, false alarm. I'm fine now."

Dazai stares at him, not entirely convinced. "You sure?"

"Positive." Chuuya hops to his feet and only stumbles a little, nodding confidently before unbuckling his pants. "Really. Just needed to let that out."

After he finishes and washes his hands, they make their back to the backyard where the noises have grown louder since they left. Other than Gin, who had excused themselves a few hours into the celebrations because of something Agency-related in the morning, their guests are still here, though not necessarily in one place. Last Dazai heard Albatross announced paying a visit to the monsters. Now his voice greets the two of them as they emerge from the house.

"Aye, finally finished fucking?"

The loose circle that has formed on their veranda opens up for them. Chuuya flips Albatross off and wordlessly stretches out his other hand to ask for a cigarette.

"Where've you been?" Shirase mutters, handing him one. "I thought you'd skipped my goodbye party."

Piano Man casts a mildly bewildered glance in his direction. "This is his wedding."

"And my goodbye party."

Chuuya takes a long drag, leaning into Dazai behind him, then lets it out along with a scoff. *"I* didn't leave. You're the one leaving Japan to…" He makes a vague gesture. "Drink tea and eat beans with toast for breakfast."

Whether Dazai wanted to or not, he had to overhear a lot of life developments that Chuuya's friends went through over the past years — sometimes not just from the source itself but from a dozen different ones as well, which is why having sex with co-workers should be

prohibited. Apparently, Shirase has been feeling *useless* and *neglected* back in Yokohama — *"I just feel like I'm not reaching my full potential, you know?"* Dazai can't possibly imagine why. So Shirase has decided to look for his calling elsewhere. Why he chose London of all places is a mystery to Dazai, though it is not interesting enough to bother solving.

"— moved as well, dude."

"To the fucking countryside, not another continent." Chuuya's body tenses against him and relaxes again when Dazai slides his arms around his waist. He may not have much warmth to give, but Chuuya has enough of that on his own. Sometimes all he needs is to know that it's real and not a drug-induced fever dream. "Besides, this is like a vacation — a really long one — until we figure out what to do or where to go next."

Albatross' attention pivots to Dazai. "I thought this farm life thing was Dazai's wet dream?"

"It's not a farm, it's a vineyard. Educate yourself. And it's only a piece of land. An idea, really. It's not the be-all and end-all of our future." Dazai likes it here. Their house isn't completely finished yet and still, it already feels like a home. The land that surrounds them looks like it was stolen out of an impressionist painting early in the morning and later when the sun begins to set. But his utopian fantasy has never been about a location. It has always been about carving out a slice of peace in a world that revolves around worthless wars and doing it with Chuuya by his side.

The vineyard isn't the finish line. Dazai doesn't even like wine all that much, especially now that it tastes like nothing.

The conversation splits into several smaller fractions; intimate murmurs fill the night, harmonizing with the hum of insects in the background.

Chuuya turns to Yuan, who has been sipping a glass of wine while chatting with Lippmann. "You're coming back though, right? London isn't forever?"

"I'll help Shirase get settled and do some serious shopping; I'll be back, though. Then we'll see." The shadow of a secretive smile dances across her face as she shrugs. "I have some options on the horizon."

She has spent a few nights here, not only helping Chuuya get back on

his feet but deliberating what to do with her future now that she is no longer tied to the Port Mafia. While there still is a place for Yuan there — Kouyou has grown quite fond of her over time, Dazai suspects that it's not the same now that Chuuya is gone. Pretending that he is dead in front of all of her co-workers must not be too easy either. Dazai notices her exchanging a look with Lippmann. Hmm, now that's someone to watch out for on the TV.

"I'll still be here, Chuuya. Don't you worry," Albatross chimes in, clapping his own chest with a broad grin. "Maybe I should take a week or two off if you still need any help with the house?" He elbows Piano Man. "I deserve a holiday, eh?"

"Mmm."

Chuuya pauses in Dazai's arms. "You mean right now?"

"Sure, why not?"

"Because we don't want you here," Dazai replies in his place.

"Not now, at least," Chuuya adds, the vibrations from his laugh making his body shake. "Give us two or three weeks."

It's Lippmann in the end who regards Albatross with a frown of concern. "Darling, it's their honeymoon. Do you really want to be here while they're fucking like rabbits?"

"I wouldn't mind," Albatross retorts, shrugging the argument away until he eventually lets out a sigh and rolls his eyes. "Relax. I don't."

"More like stray dogs," Ice Man comments under his breath. The others continue to poke fun at Albatross, but Dazai glances at him in curiosity.

Noticing the attention, Ice Man only raises his brows. "Have you seen how many strays there are in Yokohama?"

Well, he has a point.

Chuuya sighs and nudges his cheek against Dazai's arm. Dazai plants a kiss on the place where his collar used to sit, smiling against his skin when a shiver flits across his nape. Albatross says something wildly inappropriate. The sound of drunken laughter and carefree conversations carries on throughout the night, on and on and on until eventually those, too, get swallowed by the inevitability of time.

Time, a merciful tyrant. No matter how horrific or how wonderful a moment is, it will pass. That is the one and only thing that resembles a truth in this world. Everything passes. And it is as devastating as it is comforting, this knowledge that nothing ever lasts forever.

The celebrations pass. Some of their friends pass out in the sleek-black cars that take them back to Yokohama. And in the living room, Chuuya passes by Dazai, sinking to his knees in front of Kafka who has wandered down somewhere in the past hours to nap on the couch, surrounded by her entourage of family members. Jiji and the two stray cats that have joined the family somewhere along the way. Haku, misty-gray, painfully shy but purring the loudest, was brought home about a year ago by Chuuya after he proclaimed that they would have to wait to leave the Port Mafia to get any more pets. He saw the starved thing limping along a bridge and didn't have the heart to drive past him. Obviously. And the newest addition, Sonic, a tabby that Dazai picked up during a spying and assassination mission. He had just killed her owner, so adopting her was the decent thing to do. Chuuya complained loudly for two hours before falling asleep with her on his chest. She is delightful but also a terror, climbing walls like a giant furry spider three times a day.

Kafka has only minimally grown since hatching, now the size of a Cocker Spaniel. She has, however, matured over the years, no longer bouncing off the walls and destroying every piece of furniture in sight during every minute of the day, only succumbing to the post-sleeping mania occasionally these days. Now she stretches her legs, mirroring the movements of the cats, and hops onto Chuuya's shoulder, who laughs like it's the first time.

"Awww, you miss us, sweetheart?" he coos, petting a spot under her jaw with the pad of his thumb before answering his own question with an enthusiastic nod. "I did. I missed you sooo much, my little gremlins."

Kafka produces a guttural chirping noise, which sounds more disturbing than it is. It's sweet. He suspects it's her way of meowing.

Resting his arms on the back of the couch, Dazai watches them for a while until a furry tail hits his chin and he glances down at the black cat that stares demandingly up at him.

"Jealous that Kafka's getting all the pets, huh?" She rubs her head against the hand he stretches out to her, getting her dose of attention come hell or high water. Dazai huffs to himself. "Don't worry, Miss

Kitty. I know that you're the OG. I know."

Chuuya snorts, but he is too busy playing with Kafka and the other two monsters that have been roused by the commotion, climbing all over him like he is their cat tree — like they don't have a dozen toys scattered all over the house. That's alright, Dazai thinks. *This* is alright.

He isn't sure how much time passes as they sit in the gentle silence of the living room, entertaining their pets so they won't disturb them later on — a naive thing to hope for. They all get fed at a specific time, and any changes to that routine are met with loud complaints. The night outside gradually grows less and less dark. Dazai only knows that his mind has grown tired, a rare and appreciated occurrence, just as Chuuya starts yawning with Kafka curled around his neck like a snake.

"C'mon, time for bed," Dazai decides, rising off the floor and offering his husband a hand.

Gripping his fingers, Chuuya lets him haul him to his feet. Kafka flies off in the process. When they're face to face with each other, Chuuya waggles his eyebrows. "You mean, time for sex."

Dazai snorts. "If you stay awake long enough. You look like you're about to nod off at any moment."

"Am never —" Another yawn cuts him off, and makes him glare at himself but also at Dazai. "Shut up. I'm never too tired for that."

"Uh-uh." Humming, Dazai slides his hands down to Chuuya's hips. "What about a dance? Not too tired for that either?"

Chuuya's mouth purses into a reluctant line but his eyes continue to shine. "You want to dance?"

"That's part of a wedding, no? We haven't done that yet."

"Fine," Chuuya murmurs, looping his arms around Dazai's neck and resting his forehead against his shoulder. His entire body sags with the sigh that he heaves.

There is no music. Not even words. Just the steady beat of one heart beating for two people, and the occasional sound that their feet make on the floor.

“Remember the last time we danced like this?” Dazai asks.

Chuuya stiffens, clearly not a fan of the implication. He shakes his head before lifting his head to Dazai, eyes bloodshot from physical exhaustion but vigorous. Alive. He is alive. “It wasn’t like this.”

Dazai meets his ferocious stare with a pensive tilt of his head. “Wasn’t it?”

The banquet had been a good one before that, filled with people, laughter, and drunken inappropriate kisses. They were in love. They were alone and dancing. Each tiny aspect of that night is strikingly similar.

“That was an ending,” Chuuya says, looking at him. “This is a beginning.”

“Isn’t every beginning inherently an ending? Nothing can start without something else concluding first.”

Chuuya’s jaw ticks in silence as they continue to sway across the living room. After another moment or two, he exhales a tight breath, lifting one shoulder. “I guess.” Then his brows furrow, but when he looks at Dazai, the corner of his mouth tips up into a helpless half-grin, mirroring the strange sensation inside Dazai’s chest. A feeling of being entirely powerless against something so much grander and bigger than him and the paradox of relief and frustration. “So that’s what they call a happy ending, huh?”

“Well, I’m a ghost and you’re…” Dazai makes a face. “A drug addict who will probably not survive another dose of the only thing that grants him control over the singularity that lives within him. Not to mention that we both have quite a lot of baggage to unpack —“

“Alright, I get it,” Chuuya cuts in with a dry huff. “No such thing as a happy ending.”

Dazai makes a vague sound in his throat, a mixture of agreement and objection. “Perhaps not in the conventional sense, but…” He pauses to savor the finality of this pointless discussion, the amusement in Chuuya’s eyes, and this moment before it, too, passes. “It is happy and it is an ending.”

Chuuya offers him one more indulgent smile before he hugs Dazai closer, burying his face in the crook of his neck. “It’s enough. That’s what it is.”

THE END

Chapter End Notes

If you've made it this far, congratulations! It's either because you've been following this fic for a considerable amount of time or you've recently devoured over 450k words! I never planned for it to be so long but I got carried away which, I suppose, speaks volumes about how much fun I had writing it! I've written a couple of long fics at this point and even though this one has been by far the longest one, it was the easiest to write. Don't get me wrong, I definitely hit some blocks along the way but overall, it has seriously been a blast, which is why I am a bit sad that it has come to an end :") I'm also proud of myself, though! It's nice to finish projects. I do hope you guys enjoyed the ride as well despite all the pain I've put you through lmao <3 Publishing ALIT would have only been half as much fun without all the kind feedback and support from you! I'm very grateful for every single comment, kudos, bookmark, and person who ever recommended this fic to anyone else!!! Thank you from the bottom of my heart <3

PS: I still plan to give you guys a link to a document with some deleted scenes, so if you ever see this fic being 'updated', it's because of this!

End Notes

Talk to me on twitter or send me questions :")

Works inspired by this one

|Arrhythmia| SKK by Xueyun

All I Need by Chuuya_Glazer3

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!